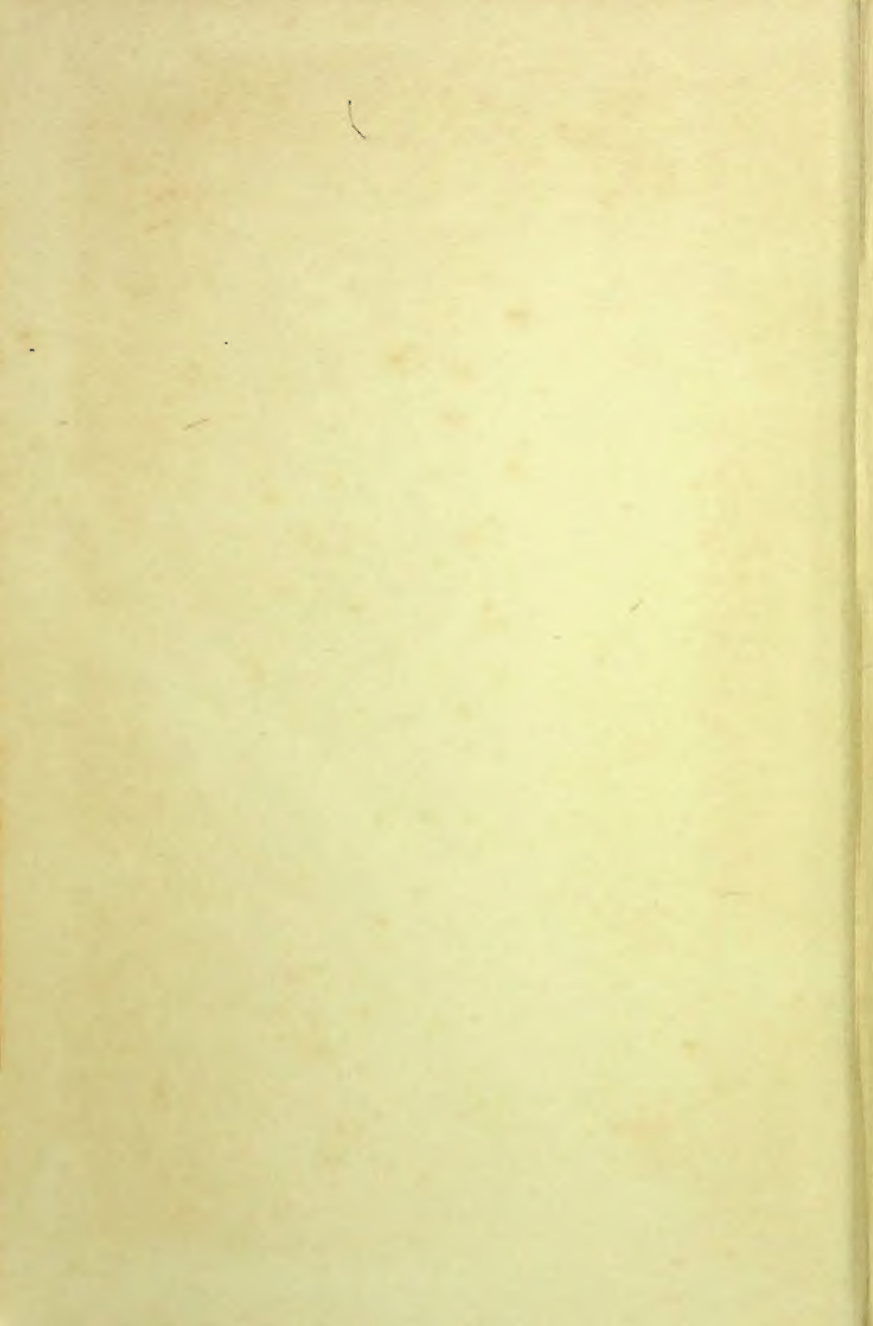


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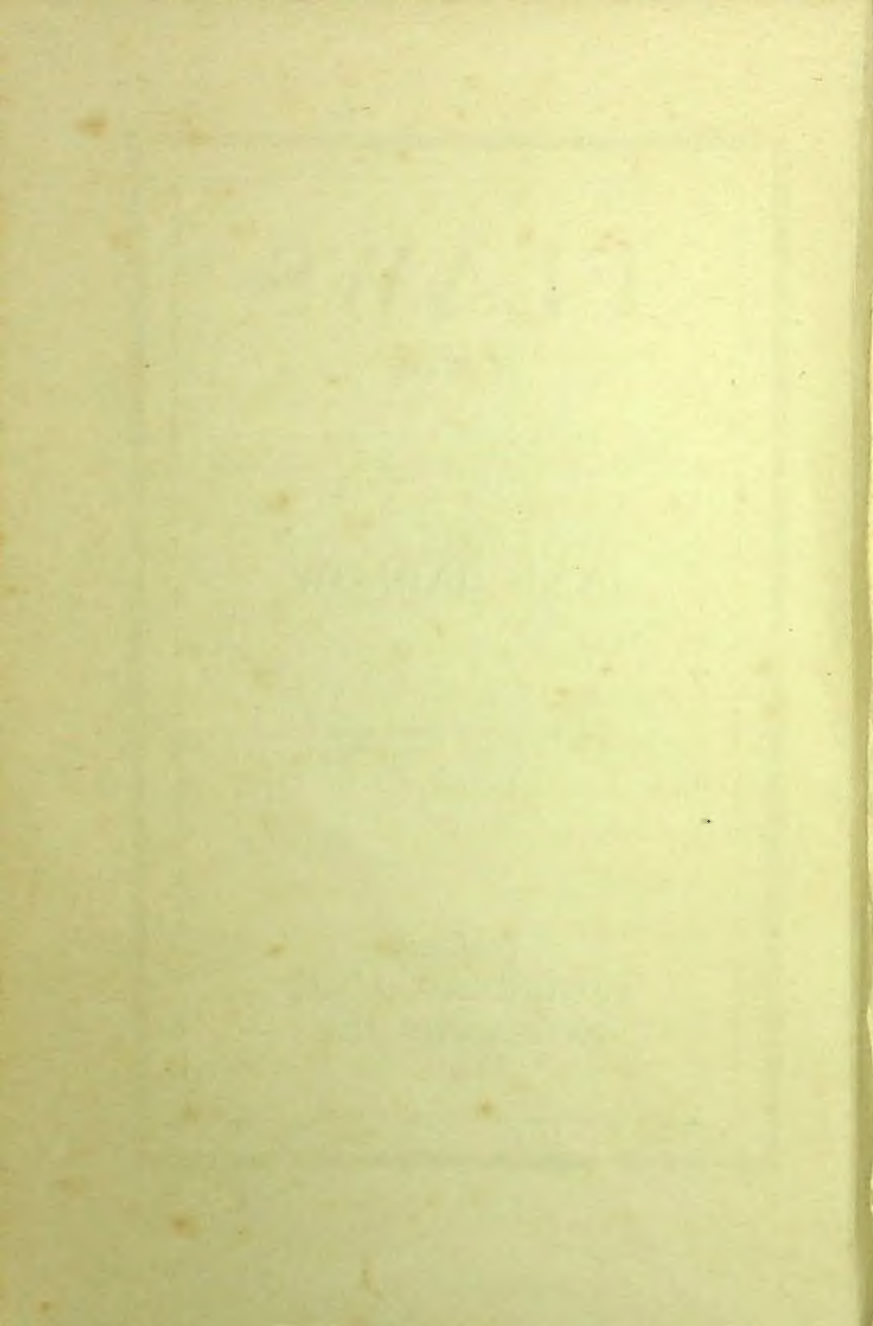
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# FLAWS

## CHAPTER I

### A DISOBLIGED FAMILY

It happened once that Sir Henry Latham, of Latham Hall, near Rathkennen, when composing the newspaper announcement of a birth in his family, wrote by inadvertence "another" daughter. This slip of the pen caused himself some annoyance, and his friends a little amusement, but it did, in fact, express his feelings accurately enough, and was in a measure symbolical, if not prophetic, of things to be.

Sir Henry might naturally indeed look upon the new-comer with disappointed impatience, seeing that she had already been preceded by two sisters, and that her arrival had once more deferred the hope of a long-desired son and heir. Nor was it perhaps altogether unnatural that such dissatisfaction should persist, even after the advent of the wished-for boy, followed by brethren in a numerous tribe.

At any rate it certainly did come to pass that

Frances Latham grew up under a cloud of domestic disapprobation. The inauspiciousness of her first appearance was tacitly recollected against her, and her family regarded her as a superfluous, negligible sort of member, whose interests could, as a rule, be postponed to those of everybody else.

Their view had, no doubt, its conveniences, and may have promoted the greater happiness of the greater number, which did not, of course, include Frances herself, who constituted a minority most ignorant about its rights, though far from insensible to the effects of their infringement.

She was, moreover, not only thus unlucky at the outset, but also in another circumstance as completely beyond her control. Unlike parents and brethren, who were without exception small and dapper, she was large of frame and long of limb, while not yet had dawned the strenuous days when fashionable athletics made it a goodly gift to be more than common tall.

Among her neat-featured little sisters the ampler proportions of Frances were quite at a discount, often becoming to her a source of embarrassment and chagrin. Throughout her childhood she found her size perpetually to her disadvantage. She was too big, the authorities said, to be made room for in the carriage, too heavy to ride the Shetland pony, too old-looking to attend children's parties, or to wear the pretty frocks provided for the others.

With half-guilty shame she listened to the little speech that her mother was sure to make whenever

the overgrown Frances came under callers' notice : " You will scarcely believe that this great creature is only six "—or seven—or ten, as the case might be.

Occasionally she overheard her elders pronounce her to be " like all the Farrells," kinsfolk of her mother, usually mentioned in disparaging tones ; and once her father added : " By Jove ! what immense horse-godmothers their women-kind always are," a remark which filled her with apprehension about her own future development.

After that she would anxiously enquire from time to time : " How high are she-giants ? " and failing to obtain satisfactory information, she at last fixed on a conspicuous notch far above her head in the post of the nursery door as a conjectural standard, reassuringly lofty. Yet haunting fears of a showman's van were not to be thoroughly laid thereby.

Even when she had grown up into really nothing at all prodigious, being just a fine, robust-looking young woman, with a sensible, and generally good-humoured countenance, her position was not, on the whole, much improved. Her household had so long been accustomed to make little of Frances, that practice had creased itself into habit ; but it was a habit which fitted her uncomfortably, for familiarity with what aggrieves us is, after all, but a very superficial sort of anæsthetic. Though everybody else might hold the opinion that Frances did not mind such and such things, Frances's own



views were apt to be quite different. They were, however, neither asked nor offered.

Much petty injustice therefore went on, its real selfishness commonly masked by an attitude of more or less amicable jocularly towards its victim, who bore many nicknames referring to abnormal dimensions and preternatural strength.

Only her mother took a serious view of what appeared to her Frances's ungainly plainness. Lady Latham's mind was possessed with restless ambition, which had concentrated itself upon match-making in behalf of her redundant daughters. Her zeal in the pursuit of this object would have been unbounded had not intense family pride made her fastidious as well as eager.

An early and advantageous alliance of her eldest daughter with a county magnate had raised her hopes, and enlarged her demands; but this brilliant beginning was the prelude to an unsuccessful period of eventlessness, marked only by the fourth Miss Latham's marriage with a neighbouring rector, which could be considered nothing better than not positively objectionable.

So with three long since grown-up girls on her hands, and a junior ready to emerge from the schoolroom, Lady Latham felt more and more concerned about the unattractiveness of Frances, albeit abating never a jot of her determination to look up and not down the social ladder.

That was the state of affairs one summer afternoon when Frances and her mother went out,

driving through a network of high-hedged lanes. As a call on old Mrs. Watson promised neither pleasure nor profit, there had been no competition for the duty, which had accordingly fallen to Frances's lot. She was well satisfied with the arrangement, a drive, even only in the pony-trap drawn by the slow-paced Icelander, being rare enough to seem an agreeable variety; and she set forth unruffled, though her brother Ockley saw them off with a joke about the dangerous strain on the carriage-springs.

Nothing went wrong with their springs, but a mishap did befall them on their way home, since Tom, the pony, floundered into a ditch, alarmed at the passage of an unfamiliar object, which in those ancient days was described as "one of those extraordinary-looking velocipedes." Fortunately both the ladies and the pony emerged uninjured; fortunately, too, Frances thought, *she* had not been driving when the accident happened; and fortunately, once more, a very effectual assistant came along the lane just in the nick of time.

He was a rather small, alert-looking, youngish man, whom the Lathams had never seen before. However, the stranger's dexterous aid in extricating and soothing Tom, overhauling the trap to make sure that it had not been damaged, and mending a broken strap, served as an introduction, and also created a distinctly favourable impression. By the time that he had done these things Lady Latham had formed the opinion that his manners

were certainly remarkably pleasant and gentleman-like, and that he was probably a grandson of dear old Lady Margaret Colebrook up at the Grange.

She drew the latter inference perhaps somewhat rashly. The only thing that seemed at all seriously the worse for their upset was Frances's best parasol, a cherished property of long standing, never yet taken into everyday use. Its ornate handle had now sustained what looked like a very hopeless fracture, which Frances regretfully deplored.

But having thereupon critically examined it, the stranger expressed a confident belief that it could easily be spliced so as to show no trace of the disaster. Furthermore, he said that he knew of a shop at Dougalstown where the repairs could be done, and that as he was on his way thither, he would leave the parasol there himself. He made the proposition so entirely as a matter of course that to demur was difficult.

"I'll hurry them up," he said. "It should be ready early to-morrow, and in that case I'll leave it with you on my way back. Oh no, it's not a bit of trouble; I shall be passing your gate, for I'm coming to stay with my grandmother just across the river. It's too bad that you should be without a parasol," he added, "when, for a wonder, we are having a little sunshine."

And he did actually carry out his plan. Then it was, as they watched him disappear round the corner, a grey tweed-suited figure, bearing the incongruous roll of tussore silk frills and macramé



lace flounces, that Lady Latham observed to her daughter :

“ Well, now, we were fortunate to fall in with him. It does seem rather shocking to let him take the parasol, but he was evidently quite bent on it. Dear me, how different gentlefolks are ! One of those half-and-half sort of people would have been scandalised at the idea of doing such a thing. However, one doesn’t often meet anybody with such simple, well-bred manners. I think he must be a grandson of old Lady Margaret’s ; there’s no other place where he could be staying. I’m glad that she is to have a pleasant visitor, and indeed we *ought* to go and see her ourselves to-morrow or next day, if possible.”

In reply to this, Frances said :

“ Wasn’t it funny of him to take it for granted that people have only *one* parasol a-piece ? Just like a man, though.”

But if her words implied any disparagement, there was none in her mind. That anybody should be zealous about doing her a service was a fact unusual enough in her experience to make her think much of it ; and much of it she thought.

Nor was Lady Latham disposed to make light of the incident. Her wishes, ever on the alert, would mingle themselves with a definite scheme at the least hint of encouragement, even, as it proved, where a subject so unpromising as Frances was concerned. Before they reached home, she had determined to call next day at the Grange,

with Frances as her companion, and to take care that their new acquaintance was received with all civility when he brought the parasol.

Moreover, she set her face promptly and firmly against the witticisms of her other children, who, upon hearing details of the adventure, were inclined to jest about "the Ogress and her Black Dwarf." Earnestly did Lady Latham hope that the affair might really turn out to be no laughing matter, but rather one for serious and almost despaired of congratulation; so she lost no time in declaring repressively that jokes of the kind were extremely vulgar.

And on the following morning at breakfast she undesignedly treated her third daughter with more than wonted consideration, actually enquiring whether the remnant of leathery toast which had been left for her were still fit to eat. Crisp toast somehow seemed to be the due of a possible bride of Lady Margaret Colebrook's probable grandson.

As for Frances, she was expecting such an attention so little as not to realise at first that the query had been addressed to her, and when admonished by a neighbouring brother, she stared slightly, and answered in a hurried sort of way that it was very good. Yet, after all, she had scarcely finished her slice before the whole castle in the air disastrously collapsed.

One of the boys burst in with the tidings, which he had learned from Andy Hare, the groom, and which were presently confirmed past doubt from

various sources. Briefly, they identified yesterday's rescuer as a grandson, not by any means of dear old Lady Margaret, but of dreadful old Mrs. Halpin, a gaunt, unkempt-looking person who inhabited a little thatched lodge just opposite to the front gate of the Grange, and who was perpetually out of favour with the Lathams by reason of her poultry's frequent trespass into their adjoining shrubberies.

On one occasion there had even been threats of resort to the police, and Mrs. Halpin had then defended the proceedings of "her few hins" in what was considered an impertinent manner. The Lathams had not had any other dealings with her, but she might, of course, often be seen in her own premises, where her headgear was always a black cap, battered and brown-ribboned, or on the road wearing an absurd tiny red-plush bonnet, with a perpendicular pink feather, and a huge-patterned greenish plaid shawl.

She was understood to be some sort of pensioned dependent of the Colebrook family. Her daughter had married, apparently rather above her station, a small auctioneer named Gannon, and their son was this most recent addition to Lady Latham's list of acquaintances.

Early orphaned, he had been brought up by his father's brother in the United States, which clearly showed that what had at first been mistaken for "a slight foreign accent" was in reality "a hideous Yankee twang." Andy Hare reported

him to be "something in the Post Office—very respectable, and a grand scholar"; trivialities which could not appreciably break his pernicious fall down to the ignominious level of an ex-retainer of the Colebrooks.

The discovery filled Lady Latham with anger and dismay, heightened by a sense of some indiscreet precipitancy on her own part. Immediate steps became necessary to avert any untoward consequences. Stringent orders were issued that if any one brought a parasol to the door he should on no account be admitted. Its bearer's action in the matter was now pronounced to be "just the pushing, officious sort of thing which nobody except a person of that kind would ever have thought of doing." The whole episode seemed most awkward and unfortunate.

At this crisis it was no doubt lucky for Frances that her family circle were accustomed to see her take but a small share in their discussions. Otherwise the scantiness of her contribution to their chorus of ridicule and invective might have roused invidious comments. As it was, her silence escaped notice.

So, too, did her setting off, in the course of the forenoon, on a solitary ramble; for, as they filled up nobody else's place, and interfered with nobody else's convenience, walks abroad were her commonest form of recreation. Chance may have had something to do with it, but design had certainly helped to bring about the event, when

Charles Gannon, parasol in hand, met the owner thereof very near her gate, and could thus restore her property to her, without incurring a risk of ungracious rebuff at the door of Latham Hall.

Frances felt all the more relieved at having intercepted him, because he was carrying quite a large miscellaneous load, comprising a fishing-rod and a parcel which contained oranges evidently, for they had begun to burst through their too flimsy wrappage. He expressed to Frances a doubtful hope that the paper might hold out until he reached his grandmother's abode.

Also he consulted her about the prospects of finding any trout in the stream close by. His own opinion was that it would afford just a pretext for spending most of his holiday out of doors in country air, as he proposed to do on medical advice. By staying with his grandmother he would kill two birds with one stone, he said, for she was ailing and lonely. Inwardly Frances added the conjecture: and in much straitened circumstances.

They had indeed quite a long talk, which fact Frances disingenuously suppressed, when on returning home she was called upon to give a true and particular account of her embarrassing interview. Nobody was inclined to credit her with "the sense to snub him properly"; and though she professed herself to have been "as ungrateful as possible," her mother perceived, or imagined, in the declaration a tinge of irony, which roused a vague uneasiness.



That very evening's post, however, brought a communication which promised to remove Frances from any further risk of comporting herself with insufficient dignity towards "that Halpin man." It was a request from Sir Henry's aunt, Alicia Prescott, for the company of one of his daughters on a visit.

Now Aunt Alicia's invitations had somewhat the nature of Royal commands, as she was a childless widow, richly enough left to make compliance seem to the foreseeing a self-regarding virtue. But as she was also a disagreeable old woman, living dismally in the dullest of solitudes, everybody had a natural conviction that it behoved somebody else to practise it.

Her last invitation had specially asked for Florence, who went under protest, only to flee home recalcitrant in less than a decent week. On this occasion nobody in particular was named; whence it followed clearly that Frances ought to go. Very unwontedly, she endeavoured to resist this conclusion, but without success, and by bed-time her departure had been fixed for the day after to-morrow.

On the intervening afternoon a local garden-party carried off her mother and sisters. It is true that with grudging compunction, in view of her impending exile, Juliet offered her the entertainment, the refusal of which confirmed their theory that Frances always liked to mope about by herself.

When they had gone she set out on this favourite

pursuit. Could they have guessed the subject of her meditations, great would have been their wrathful surprise. Indeed, if her turn of mind had been introspective, she might well have wondered at the constant preoccupation of her thoughts with this plebeian Mr. Gannon, and have felt perplexed by the fact that her sentiments towards him remained essentially unaltered in spite of the discovery which had annihilated him from a social point of view.

To say that she was quite unaffected by it would be untrue, incredibly so, considering the atmosphere in which she had lived. She had not suddenly broken with all her family traditions, throwing down the old standards and setting up new ones of her own. Claims to equality on the part of any other person in his position would have seemed to her very properly outrageous. All she had done was to make an exception in his favour, and to feel a disproportionately deep regret at the certainty that none of her people would do likewise.

What her wishes and fears implied was a question which she had not yet thought of asking herself. Had it been put to her point blank, she would probably have said, and partially believed, that they were inspired by nothing except the remembrance of the poor man's good nature about her parasol, which made her loth to foresee him ignorantly incurring slights and snubs. Apprehensions of that sort were actually uppermost in her

mind as she strolled along the shade-dappled, grassy path by the quick-glancing stream, and presently came once more, quite fortuitously this time, on Mrs. Halpin's grandson.

In so far as he was equipped with all the necessary implements, and had one end of his line in the water, he might be described as fishing, but he had eked out that meagre occupation with some more satisfying study, at full length under a wide-boughed sycamore. Because he never seemed at all conscious of the vast gulf that was fixed between himself and a Miss Latham of Latham Hall, Frances, too, found no difficulty in talking across it, and they had a rather long conversation. In the course of it he showed her the book he had been reading, a newly published volume of Clough's Poems. She examined it with interest, having some taste for poetry. Longfellow was her favourite, and she knew several easily ambling passages of "Hiawatha" by heart.

Awed admiration struck her when Mr. Gannon mentioned that he was writing a bit of an article about the Poems for a magazine; and she expressed a hope that she might see it. Thereupon he wondered whether she would care to read the book when he had done with it, which obliged her, regretfully, to explain that she was leaving home on the morrow.

"Are you going a long way off?" he enquired, his face also clouding.

It was about twenty miles from Rathkennan,

Frances said, but a very inconvenient sort of place, not near a station or anything. At this he brightened up and said :

“Why, that would seem no great distance at all on my machine.” (So, thought Frances, in addition to his other enormities he had set up one of those outlandish velocipedes.) “I could ride over on it in an hour or so, if you have the slightest wish to see the Poems.”

And then Frances, instead of declining on the plea of her great-aunt’s age and infirmities, which was the least she could have done, lacking the proper spirit to rebuke his presumption by a curt refusal, had replied that she would very much like to read them, only that she feared it would give him so much trouble. Consequently they parted with the understanding that he would take so much trouble in a few days.

It need hardly be said that Frances did not mention to her family this incident in her afternoon’s walk. Indeed she scarcely dared to realise with what temerity she had acted.

Almost the only pleasant thing about Mrs. Prescott’s dwelling was the big, walled-in garden. It lay sloping gently westward, filled in summer-time with the hues and scents of flowers, fruits, and vegetables, and the sounds and movements of creatures that chirped and hummed among them. Frances would have been contented enough if she could have formed one of their party, but her great-aunt, who was laid up with rheumatic

gout, kept her in such close attendance that she seldom escaped out of doors.

One afternoon, however, Mrs. Prescott bethought her that the weather looked unsettled, and that her lavender was ready for cutting; whereupon she despatched her guest to rescue it from the risk of a wet night. Gladly Frances betook herself to the broad-topped, fragrant hedge in its sunny corner, where butterflies, white and tortoiseshell, and wild bees belted with orange and red, seemed to hover through a glowing mist of lilac.

She liked snipping off the blossom-starred spikes, and found the occupation all the more agreeable when Anne Dolan, the elderly parlourmaid, who had been sent out to assist, soon gave up the task, on the grounds that "them buzzing things had her tormented," and retreated huffily into the house.

But ere long she reappeared with a visiting-card, which had been brought, she said, by "a gentleman on an unnatural little wheeled concern," who was waiting at the front door. The name on the card was Charles Gannon. As for several days past Frances had been very continually speculating about the probability of such an arrival, the fact that she was doing so just at this moment can scarcely seem a remarkable coincidence.

There was more of mystery in the mixture of feelings with which she greeted the visitor, and it would have been hard to say whether alarm or relief, gladness or regret predominated. Uppermost, no doubt, was an urgent dread of the imme-



diate consequences should her Aunt Alicia learn that a caller had been admitted unauthorised, and should desire his summary dismissal.

Obviously, however, Frances could but hope passively for the best. So, greatly daring, she helped Mr. Gannon to a peach, warm from its sun-bath on the basking south wall; and then perceived with a fearful joy that grim-faced Anne was spontaneously setting out tea on the shady grass-plot beneath the tall wych-elm.

After this refreshment Frances reverted to her lavender-cutting, with the assistance now of Mr. Gannon, whose reckless penknife-blade reaped the little scented sheaves more expeditiously than her scissors. While they worked he explained how his visit had been so long delayed. An offer of a sub-editorship had obliged him to visit London, and on his return he had been summoned to meet in Liverpool an uncle from New York, who wished to take him for a partner in business.

Between these two proposals he was hesitating. Apart from the emoluments, which were very small, the editorial work would be most to his taste. If, on the other hand, circumstances should lead him to wish for a much larger income, he would undoubtedly join his uncle's firm. This much he made clear at once. But it was a lengthy process of tentative and gradual approaches, which at last conveyed to her the knowledge that she herself would powerfully, would irresistibly, influence his decision.

From such far-flung circles did he draw towards his main point, and by such inappreciable degrees, that she could hardly have cited any single phrase which, taken alone, fully expressed his aspirations. Nevertheless, by the time the basket was full, and the indignant bees were despoiled of their pasturage, it had been agreed that on the morrow Charles Gannon should come back to learn definitely whether or no Frances Latham would sail with him for the United States.

All the rest of that waning August day, and most of its starless night, passed for Frances in anxious thought. When a young woman is contemplating a matrimonial engagement at third sight, she may indeed well think as hard as she can.

Not that Frances had any doubts about the nature of her feelings towards Charles Gannon. The discovery of his humble origin had tested them with a result which seemed to approve their strength and tenacity more convincingly than could have been done by the mere lapse of many days and weeks. But though there might be no room for uncertainty about her own wishes, a thousand misgivings daunted her as to the possibility of facing or fleeing the domestic storm which would rage at the faintest suspicion of them.

Shudderingly she forecast the effect on her home circle of the announcement that she proposed to become the granddaughter-in-law of horrible old Mrs. Halpin and her few hens. That, she knew, was the way in which they would describe

it. Ransacking her memory, she could not recall a single instance in which she had even attempted to set herself against their wills ; so that she had no successful precedent to encourage her.

One thing that she did recollect with a curious persistency was a morsel of advice given her many years ago in her slip-of-a-girlhood. A little elderly spinster, painfully meek, shabby and oppressed, by calling an humble companion, had said to her one day :

“ Keep a bit of your own will, my dear : you don’t know what you may throw away along with it, if you let it go.”

This exhortation, emphasised perhaps by the incongruity of its bestower, had remained in her memory, and now constantly recurred to her, the experience of twenty-seven adding a commentary not yet revealed to seventeen. It was in her mind when, about sunrise, she looked with dejected wakefulness out of her window, and saw a thrush, which had been singing deliciously on a bough, swoop down and begin to draw interminable inches of earth-worm from the green of the grass-plot underneath.

Another aphorism then occurred to her as a moral for the spectacle. “ A worm *may* turn,” she said to herself, “ but it will be none the better for that, if it waits until it is in the bird’s beak. Am I caught yet, I wonder ? ”

Neither piece of proverbial philosophy would alone have much availed in helping Frances to\_a

resolve ; however, that morning, which was steadily wet without, and fitfully ruffled within by her great-aunt's ill-humour, brought her far more effectual aid. It came in the shape of a letter from her mother.

Lady Latham wrote virtually to apprise Frances that she must regard her present domicile as a permanent one. Aunt Alicia, it appeared, had written proposing that Frances should thenceforward make her home at Hill View, on the understanding that she should be substantially remembered in its mistress's will. No very large legacy, it is true, could be forthcoming, as Mrs. Prescott's means consisted mainly of a life-annuity ; still, her savings might be considerable.

"And," wrote Lady Latham, "we can't afford to refuse any sort of decent provision for any of you these times."

She was one of the people who live perpetually in "these times," and utter chronic lamentations over them. "I daresay," she concluded, "you will get on very well with Aunt Alicia."

Frances read with mingled feelings. She had longed for something to harden her heart, and here was what gave her one, so to speak, like a red-hot stone. Made little of though she was accustomed to being, she had never imagined that her parents would so lightly have discarded her, sending her off into indefinite dreary exile and servitude. Full well she knew that her great-aunt cared for her not at all, and merely wished

to secure a drudge, the payment of whose wages could be conveniently postponed.

It was well for her now, she reflected with much bitterness, that another situation had been offered to her, and that the ordering of her future had been taken out of their unkind hands. So completely, in fact, had resentment, for the time being, swallowed up compunction, that she even said to herself vindictively: "I should *like* to tell them that he was a tinker or a cockle-picker; it would serve them right."

And when Charles Gannon arrived seeking his answer, in the middle of a dismal, fractious afternoon, he found that all her irresolution had been overridden by aggrieved wrath.

To this defiant mood naturally succeeded a cold fit, which brought with it wistful regrets, and tremulous dread of the coming collision. After all, the old ties were very strong, and fastened with intricate knots by no means easily to be undone. She was really too fond of Jerry and Ralph, and her favourite sister Di, to think with unconcern of leaving them for almost another world, and becoming an outcast in their eyes.

The prospect could only be faced in the light of her knowledge that the world she had hitherto inhabited would become for her a desert place were she separated from her acquaintance of a fortnight's standing. Against her indictment of her parents rose up a host of life-long reminiscences, bringing countercharges of undutiful ingratitude:



even the incident of the cold toast served to reinforce them. And the communication of her amazing news was turned from an act of justifiable and enjoyable vengeance into a very terrible task.

It was, however, unexpectedly spared her, for in the course of that day her great-aunt, moved by some access of spleen, despatched to Latham Hall a sort of postscript to her previous letter :

“ You must give Frances clearly to understand that *no followers are allowed*. I mention this because she has had *several* visits from a man called Gammon or Cannon, or some such name ; and they must come to an end if she stays here, for I have no notion of being plagued with people dangling and philandering about the place.”

In response to this missive came post-haste to Hill View Frances's astounded parents, assured of hearing the worst, and ready to receive it with tempestuous indignation. Their furious tirades indeed defeated their own object, driving her to grasp her purpose more firmly still, as at least a refuge from what would thenceforward be an intolerable position.

And when all was said and done, the storm by-and-by subsiding, let some extenuating circumstances emerge into view. Chief amongst these was the proposed immediate departure for America of the mis-allied pair, who, it might be hoped, would no more return to embarrass their reluctant connections.

Charles Gannon's pecuniary prospects, too, were

certainly fair enough ; and he himself, though this could on no account be openly admitted, was not unpresentable. Therefore in the end the match was not absolutely prohibited and discountenanced by Frances's family, though they accorded her only the most severely quiet of weddings, without, as the scandalised lady's maid declared, so much as a pair of new gloves.

The ceremony took place at Queenstown, on the verge of that transatlantic voyage, and but a small detachment of Lathams attended. Di, and the bride herself, cried nearly all through it. When some one remarked on the fortunate circumstance that the bridegroom was not, like his grandmother, a Catholic, which would have caused religious complications, his mother-in-law gloomily supposed that if the truth were known he was no better than an atheist.

But despite all these, and not a few other drawbacks, Frances saw no reason to regret her daring step. This may be gathered from the fact that almost on the eve of her departure her demeanour was caustically criticised by her sister Florence in the remark : " It's well to be easily pleased." To which Frances rejoined : " It really is, my dear. And you know you *may* some day find something to be easily pleased with yourself." Whence, again, we may infer that this worm which had turned, albeit wielding no such fatal weapon as its far-off cousin of the Nile, was yet not entirely stingless.

Frances always considered Florence to be "the only one of them all who was downright ill-natured"; and certainly from none of the others did she part with no wish for future meetings. She found it a melancholy business to say indefinitely long farewells, uncheered by any bridal festivities, and for congratulations sped with frigid hopes that she might never repent of what she had done. Thus she made her exit sorrowfully, under a cloud, without at all foreseeing that she would become a person of sufficient importance to justify these notes on her earlier experiences.

## CHAPTER II

### THE HALF-SQUARE

THE root of Mrs. Gannon's importance was money. Her husband made it steadily for several years after their arrival in New York, and then, on a sudden, with great rapidity during some commercial crisis.

But he did not live long to enjoy his fortune. His work as a business man had always been done against the grain; he cared nothing, intrinsically, about its processes, and not much more for its results; but feeling that this indifference might be unfair to his wife, he sought to counteract it by toiling hugely and recklessly, a course which did not prove to her real advantage. For when industry has to supply the place of interest as a motive power, it causes destructive wear and tear in the human machine; thus Charles Gannon's health, never very robust, was broken down prematurely, and he died after a short illness, midway between forty and fifty.

This event left a melancholy blank in the life of his widow, not to be filled by all the wealth of which it put her in possession. It had long been

her constant vain endeavour to lure him away from his detrimental over-work; she had even studied books on art and other deep subjects, that she might qualify herself to converse with him about the learned pursuits, over his abandonment of which she grieved, feeling remorsefully that he had for her sake renounced a congenial literary career.

But he steadfastly resisted all her efforts with a proud persistency, having made it a point of honour to see that she should not be a loser, at least in a pecuniary sense, by having become his wife. And then when this was much more than accomplished, and he inclined to take advice, to slacken the strain and spare himself, the opportunity for being prudent had gone by, and he found himself called upon to rest with great completeness from all his worldly labours. It gave him some satisfaction to reflect how rich she would be; yet on the whole he was thwarted and disappointed. That abrupt ending had frustated the principal part, the crown and climax, of a long-cherished plan.

What he had secretly looked forward to as the recompense for his distasteful toil, was a dramatic demonstration of his wealth in the eyes of his Frances's haughty kinsfolk. Generally speaking, he had no desire at all for profusion and display: but he nevertheless designed a visit to his old home, which should have been marked by these features in the highest degree.



He would have taken the largest place to be had in the neighbourhood of Rathkennan, and have lived there on the grandest and most ostentatious scale. Frances should have driven about in a carriage drawn by superb thoroughbreds, and attended by footmen in powder and plush. They would have given magnificent entertainments to the Great, who, as he was by this time well aware, would come lowly and reverently wheresoever money was. That period of elaborate splendour need not, he thought, have been more than brief. When it had lasted long enough to dazzle and astonish, he and his wife might have returned home to live quietly and comfortably ever after.

Now, since these things were not to be, he would have liked to suggest that Frances should carry out some such plan later on; but he had never mentioned the subject to her, and increasing weakness made the broaching of it seem an effort beyond his powers. Perhaps she might do it of her own accord. In that case, he went on speculating, if she fell in again with the Lathams, it might happen that some of her nephews and nieces would inherit the property, which was left entirely at her own disposal.

The idea did not displease him. He knew that adversity had overtaken many Irish landlords, and it seemed to him that the fates would be wreaking a magnanimous kind of vengeance if the Lathams' fortunes were restored with funds provided by the despised grandson of old Widdy

Halpin. All his relatives in America were well off, and he doubted that any were still to the fore in Ireland.

He did try once to express these views, but Frances unluckily misunderstood, and supposed him to be warning her against bequests to her family, which she hastily assured him she would on no account make. If he wished, she added, enquiries for his Irish kin should be set on foot. Seeing him feebly shake his head at this, she suggested that everything should be left to various charities; and as he made no further sign of disapproval, she adopted this for a final settlement of the matter. Charles Gannon's last waking sensation was a faint consciousness of failure.

After his death, Mrs. Gannon continued to inhabit their country house not far from Brooklyn, being at first deterred from the trouble of a move by her sense that her occupation was gone, and that existence would now seem everywhere equally unmeaning and aimless. She led a very solitary life, as she had neither child nor friend, and but few acquaintances.

On her arrival in New York she had come among the class of people who are often described as "very American," and she had shrunk away from them in some bewilderment and alarm, until they habitually spoke of her in phrases which she would have found hardly intelligible, and which all implied the opinion that she was stuck-up and gave herself airs about nothing. Though she

really did not intend to be or to do so, appearances were against her.

Apart from her great loss, she could scarcely be said to deplore her solitary state, nor did she feel it lonely, until her middle-age began to verge on elderliness, which happened somewhat early. Then indeed her thoughts turned wistfully towards the old country, where she might once again establish herself among familiar surroundings. Hills and fields and roads known in every turn were in her mind rather than any human companionship. For that she did not hope, or perhaps greatly wish.

The lapse of nearly a quarter of a century forbade her to imagine that she would find unchanged aught more animated than stocks and stones. Her parents and Di were dead, while her prolonged absence, following on her reprehensible conduct, had so thoroughly estranged the others that she knew little about them beyond the bare fact of their continued existence in this world. Nevertheless her homesickness went on increasing, and at last urged her across the ocean.

Near Rathkennan she took the house known as Lea Lodge, a residence suited to a person of moderate means, and the modest establishment which she set up there matched it well. She was very far from desiring to flaunt her wealth in the eyes of her family, who, she gladly reflected, did not at all surmise its existence. Even on the other side of the water its magnitude had not been generally known.

Although she was quite ready to acquiesce in her husband's supposed wishes that no Lathams should share it, she would have been distressed by their knowledge of the facts. Whence it appears that she neither rose to exalted heights of generosity nor sank to abject depths of spite. So, for the preservation of her secret, she took care that her two maids, her handy man, and her tiny pony-trap should indicate nothing more than a fairly comfortable competence.

This unpretentiousness was one among the various circumstances which tended to lessen the sensation created in Rathkennan by Mrs. Gannon's return. The neighbourhood at large had long ceased from the gossip about her amazing marriage, which had enlivened them five-and-twenty years ago; and it was not of a sufficiently scandalous nature to be resumed with any great vivacity.

To the new generation springing up among her own people she was not much more than a name, which they had seldom heard mentioned, and about which, in days before they were made partakers of family affairs, some unpleasant sort of mystery seemed to hang. On the out of sight, out of mind principle, their elders' wrath had gradually subsided. A hostile feeling towards her was not extinct, but it no longer burned hotly, and many years had passed since anything had happened to stir its embers. Old Mrs. Halpin's demise, not over-long deferred, had removed a cause of daily recurring exasperation.

Her granddaughter-in-law's reappearance did now, of course, in some degree arouse this smouldering resentment. The news of it was received with more or less dismay at three houses in the neighbourhood: at Latham Hall, where her brother Ockley reigned in his father's stead, and at the homes of her married sisters, Shanquilla Park and Nolanstown Vicarage.

It was Mrs. Siberry, the Vicaress, who showed the bitterest spirit on this occasion, declaring that "the woman might have had the grace to quarter herself in some place where she wouldn't have been a nuisance—if she could find one." Long struggles with a large family out-growing a stationary income, and a perpetual dread of slipping down on the social plane, had made Mrs. Siberry discontentedly irritable and intolerant of anybody who threatened to be an additional difficulty in her already much hampered way.

This discreditable sister, who had voluntarily descended from her own sphere, would certainly prove such an obstacle, and to fling scathing words at it was a natural impulse, in default of any more effectual measures. Mrs. Siberry's first indignant exclamation struck the key-note of the strain in which she continued to talk.

On the other hand the mistress of Shanquilla Park took a more placable view. Unbroken prosperity had attended Edith FitzHenry, *née* Latham, all her days; her position was assured; her three children were happily started on careers



of their own, and she seemed to have no more serious crook in her lot than occasionally a little dulness. Under the influence of these pleasant experiences she had developed an amiable sort of self-complacency, which was neither easily ruffled nor alarmed.

Accordingly, though she did say: "How tiresome!" when she heard of Mrs. Gannon's advent, she soon began to consider that, after all, as it was nobody worse than Frances herself, it did not so much matter; it would have been different if she had imported a horde of Gannons. Then, indeed, the only thing possible would have been to ignore them absolutely, but now that the poor soul was quite alone, to take no notice of her at all seemed really rather inhuman. . . .

Sir Ockley and his wife were disposed to be less lenient than Mrs. FitzHenry, yet they did not reach Mrs. Siberry's pitch of reprobation. On hearing the news Sir Ockley said with a mild execration that he had thought they were done with *her*. He wondered what on earth had brought her over. If it was with any idea of getting pecuniary assistance, by Jove! she had come to the wrong place for that. These times——" For Sir Ockley had inherited his mother's belief in the exceptional hardships of their lot.

His wife, who had not come into the family until after the first rage against the Gannons had softened down, was inclined to follow Mrs. FitzHenry's lead; and his spinster sister Florence, who lived

at Latham Hall on a visit of indefinite duration, though unable to take any independent course, remembered bygone enmity, and sincerely desired that Frances and herself should continue to be no worse strangers.

The situation was seriously discussed one day, when Edith FitzHenry and Alice Siberry lunched with their brother and sister-in-law. Mrs. Siberry was much chagrined by her eldest sister's mildness, and strongly dissented from a suggestion that it might be advisable to make some slight advances towards the returning prodigal.

"Perhaps she's badly off, or not in good health," Edith said, "and if so one wouldn't like to think that one had done nothing for her at all."

She was remembering how in the old days she had occasionally made presents to her younger sister—a nice parasol, for instance, and a set of furs—and she now felt not disinclined to resume the practice, with appropriate modifications. To bring Frances gifts of fruit and vegetables, and take her for a drive, would not, she thought, be an unpleasant way of spending some of her own spare time.

But the Vicaress said :

"That's just the thing. We know nothing about her circumstances, or what we mightn't be let in for if we mixed ourselves up with her affairs. For anything we can tell she mayn't even be able to pay for this house that she has taken from Heffernan at Portross, and he may

suppose that he can come down on us for his rent, which would be highly agreeable."

"There's something in that, by Jove!" said Sir Ockley.

"Oh, we could easily be on our guard against anything of the kind," said Edith.

"*How*, may I ask?" said Alice.

"Besides that, I dare say she's really quite comfortably off," Edith said, shifting her ground, "only she must, of course, be very forlorn and lonely, left that way."

"They're just the sort of people who do get on in the world," put in Florence; "but if they want to have companions, they ought to stay in their own class."

"Everybody will think things much worse than they are, if we boycott her completely," said Edith, once more taking up another position.

"Yes indeed, so they will," her sister-in-law assented.

"I'm sure, Edith, you were just as angry as anybody, yourself, at the time," Alice protested, indignantly reproachful. "I clearly remember your saying that you would never speak to her again as long as you lived."

"Oh, my dear, but that was in the Dark Ages. Why, Elsie was a very small baby, and she has a bigger one herself now," said Edith, who seemed to adduce the latter fact as an irrefutable argument. "Life's not long enough to waste on keeping up quarrels about things that happened centuries ago."

"I don't see why one should be called upon to associate with riff-raff, if one lived to a hundred and fifty," rejoined the Vicaress, losing her temper.

But though *she* had the last word, Mrs. Fitz-Henry's counsels prevailed.

It was decided that Mrs. Gannon should be visited, discreetly and warily, with nothing more than decent civility, at least until they had seen how the land lay. They encouraged themselves by considering that the convenient remoteness of Lea Lodge would make it easy for them to drop the acquaintance should they prefer to do so. That little rat of a pony would find either Rathkennen or Nolanstown beyond its range. The step, therefore, was taken, even, for the look of the thing, by Mrs. Siberry.

And after all it led to nothing in particular. Mrs. Gannon received her sisters somewhat stolidly, when they put in, by design, a tardy appearance. There were indeed many known reasons for embarrassment on both sides, but probably the chief cause of her awkwardly constrained demeanour was her secret consciousness of the opulence which, as she could not doubt, would, if revealed, have placed her on an essentially different footing in their estimation.

This concealment made her feel that she was acting a part, which annoyed her, as she had no propensity for dissimulation. They, on the other hand, were disconcerted by their failure to find

any scope for the condescension and patronage that they had intended. Their sister evidently wanted nothing of the sort. No signs of indigence were to be seen about her.

Certainly she showed no excessive alacrity in accepting their guarded overtures. She fell in at once with their suggestion that she could not be expected to return their calls. In short, they were compelled to recognise the surprising fact that she desired their company quite as moderately as they did hers. The discovery gave them the kind of shock caused by walking suddenly down an unforeseen step, a thing which can never be done with dignity, and seldom without irritation.

None of this was betrayed by Mrs. FitzHenry and Lady Latham ; but Mrs. Siberry drove on her drowsy pony with a jerk from the door, after her first brief interview, remarking to a daughter, who had waited outside :

“ Well, for cool impudence I’ll back that woman against anybody ! However, she may wait long enough before *I* go out of my way to be civil to her another time.”

Then, as the autumn withered, Mrs. FitzHenry caught a chill, which sent her off to bask in the Riviera ; and Lady Latham’s lack of energy was aided and abetted by Florence, who acted as a dead weight whenever a visit to Lea Lodge came under consideration. Thus it happened that now, when only a few tangled miles of country lanes interposed, Mrs. Gannon saw hardly more of her



family than when the Atlantic swell had swung between them.

She was not, however, left in the utter solitude which she would have been neither god nor beast enough to enjoy. Fortune did her a good turn by bringing her into touch with a few neighbours, who soon became friends : the two Verolds, namely, and Christopher Considine.

These were none of them quite new acquaintances ; it may be that at her age, which was rather unseasonably old for fifty, she would not have succeeded in raising friendship from such, but they all three had about them a setting of ancient associations and inherited intimacies, which fosters growth of this kind, much as a ball of earth round the roots of a bush helps it to thrive after transplantation.

Allen and Georgina Verold, brother and sister, of Annaman, were her cousins in that remote degree, the recognition of which is in itself a mark of amity. At the time of her marriage they had passed their first decade, so that they were not now exactly young folks, though they still retained the youthfulness which is often slow to depart from those who live unstrenuously beneath clement South-Irish skies.

To them Mrs. Gannon the matron, portly and grizzled, seemed hardly identifiable with the Frances Latham of their early days, whom they recollected as even then unapproachably grown up ; and it was thus no idea of renewing bygone familiarity

that made them hasten to seek her out. Their reason for doing so was, on the face of it, nothing less trivial than the fact that she had for a long while after her emigration sent their mother a little calendar at every New Year.

Her small reason for this, again, was nothing more significant than that she had one day before her marriage, met on the road Mrs. Verold, kindly and hard of hearing, who, misconceiving her *fiancé* to be an eligible Mr. Stanley, had wished her joy of her engagement with a cordiality which had fallen refreshingly on Frances, subject to frowns and reproaches, and which she had thenceforth gratefully remembered.

The pretty flowery calendars, which waxed more elaborate each year, as Mrs. Gannon's dollars multiplied, had pleased Mrs. Verold, who had died a few months before this time, and they had now brought her son and daughter driving seven long, Irish miles on an outside car, through a steady downpour, to welcome the sender of them home. The courting of anybody's acquaintance was an action so unusual in the Verolds, who were shy and indolent people, that, upon reflection, it surprised even themselves.

It turned out very well, its most important result being the reintroduction to Mrs. Gannon of their friend and neighbour, Christy Considine. He was the sole survivor of a family long established in that countryside, and for several generations on friendly terms with Latham Hall.

Frances Latham had known him as a small boy in tunics, and on renewing their brief acquaintance found him recognisably the same person at thirty as at less than a quarter that age. Even in externals he had rather developed than changed. From a height of six feet, much as from one of three, he fronted the world with a square-jawed, blunt-featured, sun-browned face. The precious jewel of cheerful goodnature still shone honestly in a pair of rather small, clear, blue eyes. He continued to be independent in forming, and frank in expressing, his opinion of persons and things.

In addition to these natural attributes, however, he had acquired, unwontedly early in life, an extensive knowledge of affairs, and a free hand in managing his own. Circumstances had made him his own master when he might well have been yet a schoolboy, grinding at grammar, instead of learning lessons on a larger scale in his big, empty house. They had also put him in possession of means which enabled him to choose his own manner of living, provided that he did not insist upon over-sumptuous daily fare; and he had chosen, so to speak, a crust of bread and liberty. Only epicures, it is true, would so have spoken, and some well-intentioned members of the fraternity did point out to their young friend, on the threshold of his career, various courses by which he might aggrandise himself, and augment his somewhat impoverished estate; but none of them lured him from his belief that farming for business, and field-sports

for pleasure, would suit him better than marrying an heiress, or taking service with a Cabinet Minister. He had gone, therefore, undeflected by advice, on his way ; and some of his disregarded counsellors still considered it a subject for regret that a young man with such excellent abilities, and so well connected, should be neglecting all his opportunities of founding a fortune or a family.

Among his neighbours, who were unbiased by any especial concern about his worldly advancement, this want of ambition would have been approved, as it left him accessible and at leisure, when they wished to consult him. A general confidence in his judgment and integrity led them to do so rather often on critical occasions, notwithstanding that they were for the most part his seniors in age and experience. Popular, strictly speaking, he was not, being more outspoken and impatient of conventions than is compatible with remaining steadily in everybody's good graces.

It seldom happened at any given time that some one or other was not out with him, having taken offence at some plain speaking or breach of etiquette ; but such estrangements commonly ended when the affronted party wished to have Christy Considine's opinion on the subject of draining a field, making a lease, buying a horse, or the like complicated business, and the quarrel, having been one-sided all along, was speedily made up.

It was a difficulty about the Lea Lodge water supply that caused the Verolds to invoke his aid

on Mrs. Gannon's behalf. So valuable did it prove that she was strongly impressed by his capabilities ; all the more because she had a very clear recollection of him in belted brown holland, under nursery-maid escort.

She remembered how he had once refused point blank to shake hands with her, on the grounds that it would do nobody any good, and might disturb a field-mouse, which he was carrying home for a pet.

"You can shake your own hands quite well yourself, if you want to," he had added sententiously, "or if you can't you must be as stupid as an old cow."

Vividly recalled, the quaint absurdity of five years old seemed to heighten the effect of his mature wisdom by a suggested illusion that it was precocious. Little Christy Considine, whom they all used to commiserate for having no near relations left except an infirm grandfather, was a person not to be at once entirely superseded by this much-magnified namesake, with his points of puzzling resemblance. Her reminiscences added an element of the marvellous to the powers that she admired.

By the time that, under his supervision, her well had been successfully deepened, and pronounced by the pump-maker "able enough to supply the cities of Cork and Manchester," she and Christy had become firm friends. It is not to be wondered at, therefore, that she ere long made him a request which showed her reliance upon his goodwill and capacity for business.



It must be admitted that he did not accede to this request by any means over-graciously. He said :

"The thing would be a great nuisance." Then he reflected for a few moments and added : "An *in-fernal* nuisance." After which he went a little more into detail. "A pack of old, idle women all squabbling together from morning till night, with their pet dogs and cats and parrots—and parsons. . . . Oh Lord !"

This last consideration threatened for a while to ensure a flat refusal ; however he resumed :

"Still, as you say, I should be wanted chiefly before they are collected ; and later on I daresay I could generally keep at a safe distance. Well, I'll give it a trial at any rate."

"I am very glad of that," Mrs. Gannon said. "You have so much more sense than most of the honest people I know, or indeed of the other people either, and sensible honesty will be a *sine*——" She did not finish the sentence, being checked by doubts as to whether *sine qua non* or *sinecure* were what she ought to say.

A straining after correctness in speech sometimes led her into perilous experiments with foreign phrases imperfectly understood. The habit had sprung from her anxiety to converse as befitted the wife of her man of letters, and it was almost the only pretentious trait about her.

"Let us stick to plain English," said her friend, whose instinct it was firmly to repress such pro-

pensities. "You want somebody who is as little likely as possible to take or be taken in: that's what it comes to; and if you think I have these qualifications, I'm not going to disclaim the first part of them at least. As for the second, the doings of what you call the other people are concerned, so that of course we can't predict the result. If I thought I could, I should probably be the more easily made a fool of. However, I certainly have had some considerable experience of jobs, which seems likely to come in usefully now."

They were discussing the provisions of Mrs. Gannon's will, which it appeared expedient to draw up without delay, because her wealth was so great, and her hold upon her property so precarious. For a long time past she had felt that her health was failing, and she had lately been assured of this by a medical opinion. Not until, at about the same time, Christy had gone into her affairs for her, had she realised the largeness of her resources, the swiftness with which a difference between income and expenditure was causing her dollars to accumulate.

The coincidence of these two discoveries made her anxiously alive to the possibility and misfortune of dying intestate. They strengthened her conviction that she would be guilty of a breach of faith against her husband, if she allowed this great fortune to enrich her own next of kin. That she must lose no time in giving and bequeathing it

otherwise was her first thought, accompanied, however, by an earnest wish to carry out a scheme, which she deemed quite consistent with her pledge, and over which she had been brooding almost ever since her return to Ireland.

She thought of devising half her property to this, and that was why she had sought Christy Considine's assistance, the disposal of the other half being a simple matter, as she intended to divide it among various charities in which she took an interest.

There was nothing strikingly original about Mrs. Gannon's scheme. It was her wish to found a small colony of homeless gentlewomen, who should each have a little detached house and grounds, where she should be absolutely her own mistress, independent and free to live as she pleased.

"I'll have no rules and regulations," Mrs. Gannon said. Only those should be admitted whom, brought up in affluence, adversity had left without any resource save "living in other people's houses:" with no means at all of decent subsistence, in however simple and frugal a way. On this point she laid great stress.

"For," she said, "I think nobody who has that is too badly off. And as for people who prefer poor relationship and pauper luxury to a plain little corner of their own—I have known women who did—I don't think much of them; so nobody should be considered eligible who has more than, say, forty pounds a year."

Such was the rough outline given to Christy when she first disclosed her plan. He soon perceived that about all within it her views were extremely chaotic, only a few details emerging here and there, and that she would have much need of some one to act as trustee, manager, and general putter-into-shape of the settlement at its critical first beginning. When once he had consented to undertake these offices she became more communicative on the subject, letting it appear that her design had sprung from long reflection upon notes made in the far-off days of her youth at Latham Hall.

There her rather small and aimless part of plain and superfluous daughter had indeed accustomed her to take an onlooker's detached and impersonal interest in the drama of domestic events, watching its scenes observantly, and following with especial sympathy the faring of certain players, partly, perhaps, because she half unconsciously foresaw in them very possible selves. And it had happened that to this class belonged the victim of the one obvious tragedy which she had witnessed during those ten or twelve contemplative years.

Of it she had never spoken to Christy until after she had obtained his promise. Scruples about unduly working upon his feelings had bidden her keep silence, which she now broke with some vague notion of excusing her persistent urging of the request.

He had come over to see her one afternoon

along with the Verolds, and when they all were at tea, Mrs. Gannon had begun to talk about the melancholy fate that often overtook the orphaned spinster gentlewoman, left destitute of any resources, a helpless dead-weight, shifted from grumbling household to household in the family. The remembrance of an attempt that had once been made to effect a somewhat similar transfer in her own case lurked at the back of her mind as she talked.

She spoke in general terms of the dreary, dependent, rootless lives which had come under her observation; the people who had spent their days in an interminable round of visits among more or less reluctant kindred, friends, or even mere acquaintances; the difficulties certain, at best, to beset the fitting in of times and seasons, and ways and means of transit; the necessity, when circumstances proved intractable, of abject angling for invitations; the hints and snubs and cold shoulders and humble pie, which would actually be the portion of such recurrent guests, or which those amongst them who were not, to their great comfort, unimaginative and obtuse, must inevitably surmise.

"And some of them," she said, "could have escaped if they had chosen: they *could* have lived on their own resources in a very small way, and they wouldn't—they stuck to the Big House, with all the appurtenances thereof, on any terms—but some of them could *not*, simply because they hadn't a penny of their own in the world.



“There was poor Etta Lavelle, for instance—one of the Malincorry Lavelles, you know—a sort of cousin of ours, who used to be staying with us every now and then. The few pounds she had hardly kept her in clothes. We all liked her, and she seemed to have a pretty good time when she was at the Hall; but she had to go wherever she could get in, and she was often very miserable, being that kind of person. It was long before your time, Christy, or yours either, Georgie, and I dare say you never heard anything about her. I was only a slip of a girl myself in those days, and I thought her quite elderly, though she can’t have been much over thirty. She and I were always rather cronies.

“Well, one morning, just at the end of one of her visits to us, she had a letter from the people she was going on to next. I saw her looking distracted over it at breakfast, and she showed it to me afterwards. It was a most disagreeable letter from her hostess, not exactly putting her off, but meant, evidently, to make it quite clear that they didn’t want to have her. Poor Etta said she’d give anything not to be obliged to go there, so I went and implored my elders to let her stay on with us for a bit; but they wouldn’t do a thing. There were other people coming, or something of that kind, and they said it couldn’t be managed. . . . You don’t know the rest of the story?

“That same afternoon she rambled off by herself into the woods, and never came back alive. She

was found next morning drowned in the Long Pool, up there near where the Three Mile River runs out of Drumganagh bog. They said she had been trying to reach some water-lilies, and had overbalanced herself and fallen in, which sounded fairly probable ; but I never thought it likely myself. You see I knew very well that she wouldn't have had the heart to care about gathering flowers."

"No, poor soul," said Georgie Verold, "but she might easily have slipped in at that place, if she was just walking along without minding. It's a bad little path ; she might have tripped over a root."

"She *might*, my dear," said Mrs. Gannon. "Sometimes I've thought that if she really was trying to get the lilies, it could only have been with a view to making herself useful ; they would have done nicely for the dining-room, and she may have hoped—— But there's nothing to be gained now by speculating. Perhaps she was well out of it, anyhow ; for doesn't somebody say that other people's stairs are narrow and steep ? and she had no prospect of anything except walking up and down them all the days of her life."

"Still, if she had had any decent sort of luck, she might have dropped off them into something less dismal than the bottom of the Long Pool," remarked Allen Verold.

"Suppose we have no stairs in the Homes, Mrs. Gannon ?" Christy said, pulling some rolled

papers out of his pocket. "Here are plans of low, one-storied houses of small size, cottages of gentility, rather attractive, I think, and suitable. Of course they occupy more space; but we're not likely to build where ground rents are high."

Thus he diverted the conversation from these rueful and irretrievable by-gones into oncomings of a more hopeful cast. By the telling of her dreary little story Mrs. Gannon accomplished more than she had intended. Her friend Christy found that it very effectively explained and emphasised her wishes, turning him from his belief that she might with advantage change her purpose, and bequeath her whole property to some charities of well-attested utility.

Once or twice he had hinted at this, and had desisted, checked by her palpable disappointment, which he still had thought might gradually be argued away. But he now thought so no longer, for he realised that she was in imagination peopling her Homes with forlorn ladies rescued from the sorrows, if not from liability to the tragic fate, of unhappy Henrietta Lavelle.

Moreover, he thenceforward set energetically about getting the plan into shape. It seemed to him expedient from every point of view that the Foundress should see the thing begun in her own life-time, contributing what was actually hers, instead of merely money perforce relinquished; and he had not been apprised of any facts which made this unlikely to happen.

On the occasion of that little tea-party, Georgie Verold objected to Christy's suggestion of stairless houses. "For," she said, "if the poor old ladies had to sleep on the ground floor, they would be dreadfully afraid of burglars and rheumatism."

"Oh, but I hope they won't all be *old* women," Mrs. Gannon said. "It would be a great pity if none of them were to escape until just the fag end of their lives. I'd like to think that some of them, at any rate, would get their houses and gardens before they had begun to feel doubtful whether it was worth while to care much about anything, as we do when everything is slipping away. Thirty-five wouldn't be a bit too young for admission."

"Certainly not," said Christy. "But as for things slipping away, Mrs. Gannon, you should take a good grip of them, and you'll find them steady enough. Before long I'll want you to look into these matters yourself, when they have taken some more definite shape. No doubt you'd be glad to see the old—the derelict ladies safely started; and then, of course"—he seized the opportunity to put in a word for his view of the situation—"looking after it all would give you as much employment as you cared to undertake."

Quite unmistakably, however, Mrs. Gannon set her face against this as a possible aspect of the affair.

"Oh, my dear boy," she said, repudiating the suggestion with a helpless flutter of her hands,

“that can never be—not as it has turned out. If things had been different, indeed——”

She checked herself, and began to talk with hasty irrelevance about the unseasonable mildness of their December. It was her intention to tell nobody of the doctor's unfavourable verdict. For, she reflected: “They are wrong often enough; and one can't do anything much more ridiculous than announce oneself to be at death's door, and then go on living as long as one's neighbours.”

That such a result could be expected in her case she did not at all believe; but she had formed a resolve to run no risks, and was confirmed in it by an instinctive shrinking from any excitement or exertion.

To Christy, unaware of these extenuating circumstances, her attitude seemed rather reprehensible. A suspicion sprang up in his mind that she belonged to the category of benefactors who do all their good deeds lazily by deputy, and bestow their gifts with prudence out of stores for which they have no further use. Some trace of this censorious feeling may have appeared in his manner as the conversation proceeded, and may have tinged his tone when he assented to Mrs. Gannon's disclaimer of any merit in making her charitable bequests.

Georgie gave occasion for it by expressing approval, which the testatrix would not accept as due to herself.

“And the Homes,” she added, “are just planned



for my own gratification, as much as if they were a new villa, or a set of diamonds. I wish that could be put in the will, to prevent the ladies from thinking that they were living on charity—it's no charity at all."

The frankness with which Christy agreed did slightly scandalise Georgie, who remonstrated with him as they were walking home through the misty twilight.

"You needn't have shown so very plainly that you thought it was the least she could do," Georgie said. "It must have seemed rather discouraging to her, you know; and many people wouldn't have done as much. And it's very lucky for the poor ladies."

However Christy was not at a loss for self-justification. He replied:

"It was really the most civil way of looking at it. You see, it would be decidedly uncomplimentary to assume her capable of leaving large sums for nonsensical objects—the erection of a huge monument to herself, say, or the starting of a private praying-wheel for her own benefit, or for the supply of gratuitous sugarsticks to Sunday school children. So we take it for granted that she must devote the money to some rational purpose, as leaving it to nothing is out of the question."

"A legacy to some robust and youthful miser would be the nearest approach to doing that," said Allen Verold, "but, of course, not permanently, unless he hid away his hoards with unusual success."

“And she’s not going to have any trouble about it beyond merely signing her name,” Christy went on disparaging. “And the old ladies are to wander about until she is safely out of their reach : a long while, I hope, for she’s a good sort, all the same, in lots of ways, though I can’t say that she seems to me especially admirable in this one.”

“Oh, maybe not,” Georgie said, unconvinced.

But the old ladies’ wait was short. Not many weeks after this Frances Gannon, sitting by her fire, and thinking that the misty drizzle out of doors was too thick for an excursion across the garden to her greenhouse, had a sudden call off and away on a longer, or at least a remoter, journey. And by that time her will had been duly signed.

## CHAPTER III

### THE OLDEST INHABITANT

RATHKENNEN found that Mrs. Gannon and her affairs gave them a great deal more to talk about after her departure than before it. The news of her wealth spread rapidly through the neighbourhood, upon which it came as a complete surprise, the secret having been known only to Christopher Considine, the Verolds, and the firm of Dublin solicitors who had drawn up her will.

On the whole, the revelation had the effect of a hypothetical disappointment. People thought vaguely of what might have been, had they become conscious in time that they were entertaining, or rather neglecting to entertain, an angel aureate-haloed unawares, in the commonplace shape of a shabby-genteel widow who had married to disoblige her family, and who seemed quite an unremunerative subject for attentions.

Among the members of her disobliged family these sentiments naturally took a form vastly stronger and more definite, as well as bitterer by far.

Even good-humoured Edith FitzHenry declared,

when she heard the tidings, one brilliant morning at Mentone, that she would never have thought it of poor Frances. If she had been informed earlier, it may be doubted whether she would have despatched such a large cross of violets and hyacinths, though she probably would still have sent over a tribute of less expensive size.

At Latham Hall and Nolanstown Vicarage, on the contrary, it appeared that more unfavourable opinions of Mrs. Gannon's character had all along been entertained. When Sir Ockley said: "By Jove! she kept it uncommonly close," his sister Florence rejoined: "It's just the underhand thing she might have been expected to do."

The Vicarress confessed to having always felt certain that Frances Gannon would do them a bad turn if she got the chance, and would herself never have gone near her only for Edith's nonsense.

That they had been grossly and grievously defrauded was the impression made on the heads of both households, so strongly in Mrs. Siberry's case that she actually, as a now needful measure of economy, countermanded a pair of ducks which she had ordered for next day's dinner. "The joint will be enough," she said austere to Maggie Byrne, the cook. They had lost thousands and thousands, she said to herself, but she was thankful to know through no fault of their own. Maggie reported the mistress to be on wire springs with contrariness.

Yet things might have been worse, as more

reasonable moods would have admitted. Mrs. Gannon's relatives had, at least, not been passed over in favour of any one alien individual, the spectacle of whose unrighteous gains would, like a burning-glass, have drawn their concentrated chagrin into an agonising focus. The torment of jealousy and envy was not added to regret; for those passions could hardly be roused by a mild glow of good fortune diffused among a number of destitute old women.

But though, by the event which had really happened, they were spared this affliction, they at once, with natural perversity, set about manufacturing it for themselves. It was the Vicar who took the first step, finding some little solace in an epigrammatic innuendo, which he uttered, for by no means the last time, at dinner on the day after he had learned the contents of the will.

"Well," he said to his worried-looking wife, "your sister's *circle* of dear friends may have been small and select, but it's pretty clear that they were able to *get round* her very successfully. I'd like to know, now, what that trusteeship will be worth to Mr. Christopher Considine. He wouldn't part with it under a good round sum per annum, I can assure you."

"I thought she hadn't left anything to him or anybody else except those nasty old women," said his daughter Paulina.

"Then you thought wrong," he replied with suppressive shortness.



"Somebody ought to dispute the will," knowingly pronounced his son Richard, a youth who, having recently entered a solicitor's office, considered himself an authority on points of law. His Latham relations said of him that he was exactly like all the Siberrys, who must, presumably, have been uniformly slim and sandy-hued. "I dare say she was as mad as a March hare," he said, "and then we'd all come in for our share of whatever was going."

But his remark fared no better than Paulina's; for the Vicar, irritated by the blurting out in a crude form of ideas which were discreetly taking shape in his own mind, bade him hold his tongue, and not talk about things he didn't understand.

At this affront to his professional capacity Richard relapsed into dignified silence; while: "I'm sure I'm most truly thankful that we've nothing to do with them or their affairs," Mrs. Siberry averred, absently helping herself to sago-pudding in mortified dejection.

Her husband lost no time in consulting his brother-in-law at Latham Hall about the chances of discovering some fortunate flaw in that otherwise most unsatisfactory testament. Sir Ockley said that he would be only too glad to do this, "for poor Frances's own sake." He did not go into details as to how she would benefit thereby.

But his zeal in her behalf was fruitless; all their investigations proved vain. No ambiguity could be found in the careful phraseology of the docu-

ment ; nor could any legal point be raised against its provisions, howsoever morally reprehensible ; its preposterously large legacies to hospitals and schools ; its dedication to a quite useless object of enormous funds, placed absolutely in the control of young Considine.

For the time being Christy had become an inexperienced, irresponsible youth ; while as for his co-trustees, the two Verolds, everybody knew that they were no better than a pair of moping idiots, whom he would have completely under his thumb. These grotesque appointments, in fact, supplied the strongest evidence available of deficient testamentary capacity on the part of the misguided testatrix.

But even that would be altogether inadequate ; little more to the purpose than Mrs. Siberry's opinion that : " If people have relations, they should not be allowed to leave their money to anybody else." There was nothing to be done.

While her family were thus unwillingly inactive Mrs. Gannon's executor, not much recking of hostile criticism, was busily employed in taking measures for the prompt carrying out of her wishes. By so doing it seemed to him that he might best make amends for certain unjust censures which he had ignorantly passed upon her, and which he now remembered with regret. A more agreeable reminiscence was his having given up two or three days' hunting that her business might be quickly settled.

“And as things turned out, there wasn’t much time to spare. A week or so later, and the old women wouldn’t have had a penny. It was a near shave.” Christy showed decided want of tact, betraying some of his limitations, when he enlarged upon this lucky narrow escape to Sir Ockley Latham, who responded with the extreme frigidity that might naturally have been expected.

Such a blunder, however, could have happened only in very early days. Soon it became manifest to everybody that the next-of-kin considered themselves deeply aggrieved, and regarded as a personal offence each step taken towards the accomplishment of a design which seemed to give the wrong done them a solid substance and shape. Circumstances enabled this to be set about with what they termed indecent haste.

For some time past a large bit of meadow land lying between Rathkennen and Nolanstown had been in the market, and since it offered a very suitable site for the Homes its purchase was now speedily arranged. The transaction met with general disapproval among persons who were not especially concerned therein. This was partly by reason of the sentiment which the neighbours entertained towards its former landlord, a pleasant-mannered ne’er-do-weel, who had some personal popularity, besides being the last of an ancient, spendthrift line, the shadow of whose greatness could not pass undeploded away from that country-side.

A certain amount of odium was incurred by the new owners, although they were nowise responsible for the fact that Dudley Peyton had persistently foreseen a short cut to retrieved fortune in the paces of some leggy, flighty creature, with an under-sized lad huddled on its back, and had pursued a will-o'-the-wisp winning-post, until finally the Court of Bankruptcy had been reached instead. But furthermore they encountered the prejudice against all manner of building operations which is common in country districts, and not without cause. Fields disfigured by the unsightly litter of burnt clay and lime cannot but lie a melancholy spectacle until blossomy garden-plots supersede it, and many seasons' weathering, or a charitable cloak of creepers, tone down the crude coloured walls.

Such prejudices were, perhaps, unusually strong round about Rathkennan. At that very moment Mrs. Darcy-Manders of Cormac Grove was still not on speaking terms with Colonel Torrance, her landlord over-the way, on the grounds that he had several years before erected, contrary to her secret wishes, the dwelling which she at present found it convenient to occupy.

And there was much to make the new enterprise peculiarly unpopular; for one thing, its large scale, "Ruining," as Lady Latham said, "a meadow which might really be called a miniature park." The phrase sharpened her neighbours' sense of the injury they were sustaining. A minia-

ture park was not a thing lightly to be destroyed at the behest of such a person as old Mrs. Halpin's grandson's widow; more particularly when it included groups of stately trees and clumps of golden-gleamed daffodils, had a pool shining in one corner, and a boundary brook leaping down from the wooded bank, that weather-fenced it on the north and east.

Then there were no social advantages to accrue in compensation for the marring of its features. The neighbourhood could gain nothing from the importation of sundry elderly almshouse women, probably decrepit, and certainly indigent.

Under this unattractive aspect were Mrs. Gannon's pensioners looked forward to at Rathkennan, where people, for the most part, made some little demonstration of disgust whenever they passed along the road skirting the misused meadow; so did the ladies from Latham Hall, who studiously looked the other way as they drove by, and likewise Pat Morgan, the Siberrys' small garden-boy, who felt it due to his position to grimace contumeliously from the back-seat of their pony-trap at the masons tapping and clinking on the wall.

All this was thrown away upon Christy Considine and his inefficient co-trustees. He had encouraged Mrs. Gannon in the appointment of Allen and Georgie Verold rather to gratify her and them than because he expected that they would give him much assistance.



Allen was an indolent person, prone to believe that a distaste for practical affairs argued capacity for abstruser studies, and to regard withdrawal from an active part in commonplace concerns as a step in the direction of more intellectual pursuits. Other steps, however, he had never taken, his habit being to hold comfortably aloof from what he called comprehensively "nuisances," and to turn on the few matters that roused his interest a ray of observation, often shrewd and humorous enough, but fleeting as the illumination yielded by a little electric lamp at the pressure of a thumb. As a rule, of course, his thumb was off, and himself remote in absent-minded indifference.

His sister Georgie, though rather readier than he to participate in what was going on around her, had, instead of humour, a tendency to fanciful sentimentality, inherited from a German grandmother, so that things seldom appealed to her strongly unless they could be invested with a sentimental or fantastic aspect.

As might have been anticipated, therefore, upon their friend Christy devolved all the business of planning and supervision. With gratitude he admitted that his colleagues gave him the freest possible hand. He decided to start with seven detached cottages, in two rows running at right angles; the spacious meadow would allow room for as many more later on. Each one stood, built about its own tiny courtyard, enclosed in its own little grounds by a low stone wall and light iron

railing. There was no contact of boundaries, the ample greensward enisling neighbour from neighbour.

On this point Christy laid so much stress that Allen Verold once charged him with apprehensions lest the indwellers should be addicted to such habits as hurling the pot and kettle across contiguous fences. But Christy was not to be jibed out of his precautions. As he sat at his desk he suddenly began to read aloud in a high, squeaky voice an extract from some invisible correspondence : "Dear Mr. Considine, I am *so* sorry to trouble you *again* about Miss Arnott's odious clematis Jackmannii, but it is smothering and *utterly* destroying the lovely top sprays of my poor darling Virginian Creeper, so I must ask you to request her, for my doing so is *useless*, to have it properly clipped *immediately*."

This argument proved quite effective. He found it a less simple matter to dissuade Georgie from some cherished designs on the subject of naming the settlement. Her turn of mind led her to desire things from which his whole soul revolted. She began by thinking that it would be very nice to call the Homes "A Haven of Rest." But she wavered into indecision when her brother suggested as an alternative "Any Port in a Storm," which she thought even nicer and more original, though perhaps rather too long.

While she was thus irresolute a still happier thought struck her, and she sought a special inter-

view with Christy to announce her opinion that there could not be a more touchingly suitable name than "A Haunt of Ancient Peace." With no small presence of mind he hastened to point out how inevitably the feelings of the elderly ladies would be wounded by the adjective. Georgie at once saw the force of this objection, but considered that it would be quite obviated simply by omitting "ancient."

Thereupon he urged that as neighbourly bickerings would doubtless form a large element in the life of the place, such an address would probably acquire a grim irony ; and when she dissented from this, expressing her belief that the ladies would, on the contrary, "live up to it," he dilated on the sinister associations of the word "Haunt," which would scare, if not the ladies themselves, assuredly their maids, and he drew a harrowing picture of their plight, left by the dread of spectres without anybody to do them a hand's turn.

Much against her will Georgie was convinced of this, and went disappointed away ; but only to return next day triumphant with an inspiration. She explained that a perfectly delightful idea had occurred to her. Each cottage should bear the name of a different flower, and they should all collectively be called "The Wreath," or "The Garland," or "The Nosegay." Nothing could be more charming, or create a pleasanter impression, "and first impressions were so important."

For the moment Christy was at a loss, chiefly

because Georgie made the remark with such an elated, knowing little air that he had not the heart to dash her spirits by declaring the nature of his own first impression. In fact his feeling of relief was mingled with some compunction, when shortly afterwards they turned up among a bundle of papers a memorandum of Mrs. Gannon's to the effect that the Homes might well be called "The Independency."

They all held this to be conclusive ; but Georgie relinquished her hour's dream so regretfully that Christy hastened to remind her how part of her plan might still be carried out. The individual houses could each bear whatever name she chose ; might even have it ornately inscribed over door or gate. Thereat she was vastly consoled. Though her design had lost its crown, the selection of seven flowery names left her scope for much pleasure ; and she secretly hoped that "The Chaplet" might yet come into use as a sort of pet name.

Practically, however, the question of nomenclature was taken out of their hands, and those of the ill-wishers who would fain have christened the place "Gannon's Folly." Its naming was accomplished unceremoniously on that day when first the lounging onlookers noted the ground-plan of those two rows. "The Independency," it is true, would bring an envelope safely, but that official title was very seldom mentioned by word of mouth, for before long everybody in and about Rathkennan spoke of the settlement as "The Half-Square."

It may be worth while to record that Georgie Verold, after all, was baulked of her congenial task, as this happened in a way which is not very common, and which throws some light on the character of the person concerned.

She had set about it with much satisfaction when an inopportune scruple intervened. The poor ladies, she bethought her, might perhaps prefer to choose themselves their houses' names. Undoubtedly it would make more difference to them than to her. Quite possibly she might be robbing them of a pleasure, or even causing them positive annoyance by her action. How unfortunate, for instance, it would be if she had called one of the cottages "Pansy Pleasance," and the inmate afterwards should wish to grow nothing except carnations. Accordingly she desisted, and told Christy that she had changed her mind, which he heard with joy, though he said to himself that it was an unaccountable whim.

As the building went on through a summer and winter, and round almost to summer again, rumours were rife in the neighbourhood, growing with The Half-Square's growing walls. They were mainly about the fabulous sums which must have been lavished on it, and the height of luxury in which its lucky occupants would live. "Sinful luxury" the Vicareess often called it, notably on the occasion when she set up a definite quarrel with Christopher Considine by remarking to him that he seemed to be squandering her sister Frances's money as



foolishly as the poor woman herself could have done.

These rumours subsisted and throve on seemingly scanty nourishment, like plants flourishing wind-sown among arid stone and brickwork. From the erection of a pretty little gate-lodge sprang a report that the ladies were to be provided with carriages and horses. Why, otherwise, should they want such a wide entrance and gravel sweep? The absence of stables and coachhouse caused no difficulty, as the livery-establishment at Drumbarne, five miles away, would obviously be quite convenient; or, more probably—this conjecture came from Nolanstown Vicarage—Christopher Considine would put them up himself, and have the use of them for nothing, besides a large profit on their keep. Oh, he was making an uncommonly good thing of it, no fear! Expense was to be entirely disregarded in the fitting up of the cottages and the laying out of the grounds. Allowances more than ample would be enjoyed by the inmates; and sometimes it was added, with vague comprehensiveness, that they were “to have every thing free.”

The District Inspector’s parlourmaid repeated the substance, if not the exact phrases, of much overheard household talk when she told Sergeant Doherty’s wife that every one of the cottages was to be a perfect little *jooby*, and that Miss Verold had gone to Paris with the intention of getting the most *recherchy* things for them that money would buy.

This statement had a slight foundation in fact, as Georgie Verold had gone to Bavaria with a widowed cousin. It was about mid-summer, and she expected to be home again long before Michaelmas, the time fixed for the opening of the Half-Square.

But, unluckily enough, on the eve of their homeward journey her cousin fell ill, and was laid up for many weeks in an out-of-the-way small town. It happened the more untowardly because shortly afterwards Christy Considine was called away, by a tragical crisis in a kinsman's affairs, to South Russia, where he found himself detained until far into the autumn.

Thus it came about that at this momentous epoch in the annals of The Independency the control fell into the hands of Allen Verold—Allen who, as Georgie remarked, with sisterly frankness, had as much idea how to manage things as Friar Sweep; and Friar Sweep was a black cat.

Allen did not take very kindly to the duties that had been so unexpectedly thrust upon him. He had all the dread and resentment of inroads upon his leisure appropriate to the person whose neighbours wonder what on earth he does with himself from morning till night.

Yet he did now and then feel some compensating self-importance at being applied to for instructions by workmen and tradesmen. The orders which he issued gave him a sense of practical efficiency, always flattering when rarely attained, and he

was happily unaware that upon their recipients they produced an entirely dissimilar impression.

Presently, however, he encountered an experience which he found troublesome and alarming, without any agreeable features at all. After some rather one-sided correspondence with a Mrs. Willester, whose long letters he read superficially, and answered vaguely, when he did not forget to do so, he was suddenly called upon to face a small, elderly, voluble woman, in widow's weeds, who one afternoon surprised him in his study, where she had what she considered a highly satisfactory interview.

There was, on the other hand, nothing satisfactory about it in Allen's opinion. From confused echoes of interminable talk the only facts which in the retrospect seemed to emerge clearly were: That Mrs. Willester had somehow become an inmate of The Independency; and that she would arrive there punctually on Michaelmas Day.

A consciousness that he had completely failed to understand with any clearness how this had come about suggested the expediency of not reporting the matter either to his sister or Christy while they were absent. Better let it stand till they returned, and then, no doubt, Christy would fix it up all right. Accordingly he pursued that simple plan, taking no other steps except to elaborate some successful precautions against any further surprises.

October's very last days were running out by the time that Christy Considine was once more

established at Clonmalin House, having got through most of the business entailed upon him by the intricate complications of poor Gerald Dormer's affairs; not but that he had brought home with him what many people would have regarded as a very substantial legacy of trouble in the shape of a small seven-year-old boy, whose guardian he was to be. The office had, in fact, already caused him some anxiety on his tedious railway journey homewards across Europe, throughout most of which little Michael had been his silent *vis-à-vis*.

What chiefly perturbed him was the strange, quiescent self-possession of this child, whose homeworld had gone to wrack on a sudden, and who had been temporarily bereft of even his sole remaining friend, an attendant of life-long familiarity. Him it had been necessary to leave behind on business at Valenkinschhof, whence he would follow them later.

In these circumstances, Christy would not have wondered if his ward had wept and lamented, or had seemed stunned and bewildered, or forgetfully unconcerned. But there was, he thought, something almost uncanny in the way Michael turned resolutely from any reference to the past, and in the unmistakable air of seeking refuge from a desolate present with which he fastened upon what books and papers, often hopelessly inappropriate, he might chance to find.

Wishing to provide him with an additional source of distraction, Christy brought along with

them from Valenkinschof a tiny, rough-coated dog, which proved a failure, as Michael regarded it with complete indifference, while the little being attached itself to Christy with inconvenient enthusiasm. He could only hope that at Clonmalin something might be discovered to divert the child from his incommunicative contemplation of his tragically piled-up misfortunes.

Christy was still in quest of such an object when, a few days after his return, it seemed to him expedient that he should visit The Independency. He knew that two or three of the inmates had arrived, and in the absence of Georgie Verold he thought it behoved him to see "how they were shaking down."

From Allen Verold, as might have been expected, few instructive particulars were forthcoming. He furnished a vivid account of his discomfiture when invaded by a terrible little shrimp of a woman in black, as old as the hills, with V-shaped eye-corners, and talking like a mill-race.

"I've been fortified against incursions ever since," he said, "and, thank goodness, I've seen nothing more of her. The only thing I'm certain about is that she has actually come. There was a letter from her some time ago announcing that she would arrive next day. It was a sort of preamble yards long, that no sane person would read through; however, Jimmy Fottrell, who's carrying the mails, says that she's there right enough, in the house next the big elm. And I believe that a couple



more were to arrive last week ; but, you see, I've mislaid several letters that may have been from them, so I dare say you know as much about it as I."

"Though that's hardly conceivable," said Christy, "perhaps I'd better look them up. And I'll begin with this loquacious widow, as she is the oldest inhabitant. Very likely she's harmless enough, poor soul."

Accordingly, on one of the gloomiest afternoons of the mid-autumn, he went to make his first call at what was still, on state occasions, spoken of as The Independency. He took with him Michael Dormer, who seemed to have no preference about staying or going ; and he left behind little shaggy Ruffian, who desired with eager yelps to be of the party.

The owners of pet dogs are not seldom thus lugubriously speeded on their way. Christy could not think it justifiable to bring a companion who might alarmingly molest the old lady's most cherished grimalkin. About Michael's peaceableness he felt no misgivings, though he scarcely ventured to hope that the visit would be aught the livelier for his ward's presence.

A slight surprise met him at the door, as it was opened by a maid aproned and capped with the utmost length and elaboration of white muslin frills and lappets prescribed by the prevailing mode. He had taken it for granted that Mrs. Willester's establishment would consist of nothing more than an unpretentious "general," or perhaps



an humbler charwoman, but never assuredly did such streamers float from a charwoman's head.

She was a tall girl, not in her first youth ; the cheerful alertness of her expression was tempered by solemn, dark eyes, with severely-drawn, straight, black eyebrows ; her voice had the plaintive sing-song of southern Ireland. Christy guessed her from the county Limerick, as she said that her mistress was just after coming in, and ushered them into the sitting-room.

"I thought herself was in here," she said, glancing round it, "but I'll fetch her and a light to yous this minute."

The small, oval room flickered with turf-firelight, and was apparently unoccupied except by a singularly sustained and resonant growl, which seemed quite to fill it. In a few moments, however, its source was revealed, as from beneath an armchair emerged a very diminutive terrier of the sort that walks perpetually in a hoary mist of spun-glass-like locks. Its absurd attitude of menace as it took up a position on the hearthrug engrossed Christy's attention, so that he did not notice an echo of the thunderous growl proceeding from behind a screen, and followed by the approach across the floor of another small, light-coloured creature.

A slight nip on the calf of his leg was his first intimation of its neighbourhood, and he looked down, expecting to find himself attacked by a more aggressive Skye. But he perceived instead that the sensation was caused by the compression of

a minute thumb and forefinger belonging to a human being about two years of age, who had crept on hands and knees over the carpet and now glowered up at him with a ferocious gnashing of small white teeth.

This formidable object was clad in a pale-grey velvet frock with a deep lace collar. Her short, brown hair curled closely all over her head, and when relaxed from its puckering of savage grimace her round little face was seen to be pink-flushed and hazel-eyed. The terrier on the rug uttered a sharp bark, which she mimicked fairly well, at the same time repeating her pinch with emphasis.

"Why so unfriendly, little wee woman?" said Christy. "Is it your custom to tear your visitors limb from limb?"

"Let us come away; she's very bad and detestful," Michael said suddenly. It was almost the only wish that Christy had ever heard him spontaneously express. He turned towards the door, carefully avoiding a glance in the child's direction; there was a sort of wrathful horror in his eyes.

"But she's just a baby, Mike," Christy said, rather astonished.

"People that never did such things are dead and nowhere in the world," Michael said bitterly. "And there she is, dressed up in just the same pretty party-frocks. Why should she be going to parties, when—— Get away, ugly, wicked little wretch!" he commanded her so sternly, as she

began to creep towards him, that she backed in under a table, where she sat peering out, puzzled and dismayed.

At this moment there entered a slender girl in a fur cloak, remarkably like Michael's enemy, allowing for a difference, seemingly something less than twenty years, between their ages. The resemblance extended even to the new-comer's expression, which was also perceptibly anxious, not to say alarmed.

"I am Mrs. Hume Willester," she said, going up to Christy with his card in her hand, "and Anastasia MacElvery thinks that you must be our landlord, Mr. Considine. Are you in a *great* hurry?"

"Not at all in a hurry," said Christy; "but you mustn't let me interrupt you if you are engaged now. I could call another day. I ventured to come and see whether everything is arranged as Mrs. Willester likes it; not that I am her landlord. She must consider herself to be practically in possession of this house."

Allen Verold's small, elderly widow, with the sharp-cornered eyes, pre-occupied his mind to the exclusion of any conjecture that he could be addressing the *doyenne* of The Independency, and he added interrogatively:

"Mrs. Willester—the Mrs. Willester whom I mean—wrote to us on the subject, and, I think, saw my friend Mr. Verold while I was abroad. She is here, too, is she not?"

"Oh no, not here," she said, and added reflectively: "That would be quite dreadful." Then, as if reminding herself of a reassuring fact: "But there's no room for her at all. . . . The Mrs. Willester who writes letters is my stepmother-in-law, and she manages everything at Garnagort now. She said that it didn't agree with little Eileen, so of course we could not stay there, and this was the only place she could find for us. It does very well, and we are quite comfortable now that Anastasia has put up the biggest boxes somewhere outside. But I was sorry to take Eileen away from her poor grandfather. Wouldn't your little boy like to come nearer the fire?"

"I'm not *his*," Michael said, "nor anybody's till I'm dead and buried like them."

"I'm his guardian," explained the repudiated Christy.

"Is *she* yours?" Michael enquired, looking at Mrs. Willester, and pointing to the child under the table.

"She is, indeed. Why, Eileen, what are you doing there?" said Mrs. Willester, stooping forward to catch a glimpse of her daughter. "Come out and speak to this little boy."

"If she belongs to you," said Michael, "you oughtn't to let her crawl about on the floor like a quadruped, and snash her teeth at people like some other sort of wild beast, besides pinching their legs."

At his disapproving tone Eileen backed further

into her retreat, whence only the shining of her eyes was visible. Her mother looked somewhat disconcerted also, and Christy, uneasy at the criticising humour suddenly manifested by Michael, rose to take leave with an apologetic remark about the censoriousness of the extremely young. As they shook hands Mrs. Willester said :

"I am glad that you really are not in a hurry about the rent, for Anastasia says that we have somehow run short of money to-day ; but I am sure that she can easily get it to-morrow."

Before Christy could frame what he felt to be a difficult reply, the door, which had never been quite closed since Mrs. Willester's entrance, was pushed more widely ajar, and the maid's head appeared, signalling silence to him with such mysterious peremptoriness that he still further hastened his departure, under cover of an unintelligible murmur.

To his surprise Anastasia shut herself out at the front door, and followed them down the walk to the small gate. Having looked through it to see that their driver was not within hearing, she said reflectively :

"Well now, but that's the very wicked-minded little ould weasel of an ould woman."

"Who ?" said Christy.

"Herself that was stepmother to poor young Mr. Hume," she said ; "and that's after breakin' his father's heart, poor gentleman, with huntin' the child away out of the house, and it all the

bit of pleasure he had left to him in this world, that does be losin' the use of his limbs every day of his life—goodness may pity him!—like water dryin' up in a sponge. I hear tell he does be frettin' hard ever since Miss Eileen was took on him."

"The little girl we saw just now?" said Christy.

"Her it is, sir," said Anastasia. "Gettin' to think no end of her he was, so when me fine lady, the second wife—that he took and married in some sort of lightness before death—noticed the way it was, she thought she couldn't bundle her out of the place fast enough, and the mother of her, poor Mrs. Hume, for fear th'ould master would be spendin' too much money on them. And by reason of that she contrived, some way, to get them packed off into this quare little corner-hole of an almshouse, where there isn't so much as room for the couple of big boxes, unless only in the weeny shed outside, that I understand was intended for hins.

"Deed now, if you happened to want a rael bad one to stepmother the nation, you might suit yourself with her. Howsome'er, if she did but know it, she's maybe not after savin' as much altogether as she consaits, for there's some few trifles th'ould master makes a shift to be sendin' here of an odd while, unbeknownst, by Matt Brady, the groom, or Lizzie Walsh, that's housemaid in it this long while. If it wasn't only for that, short enough poor Mrs. Hume would be, according to what she's used to."



"I see ; then it's Mrs. *Hume* Willester who lives here," said Christy. "But what did she mean about the rent ?"

"Ah sure, whatever an atomy of a little linnet or titmouse might mean, if it was settin' up to talk about matters of business. How'd she be apt to have any apprehension of such things ? Swimmin' in riches she was ever, up to the time she got married, when there was no age to spake of on her at all. 'Twould never enter into her mind to be askin' where anything came from. Suppose I stepped in to her now with a handful of sovereigns, and told her I was after findin' them in an empty flower-pot, she'd just say : 'Oh, thank you, Anastasia, now we can send to-morrow and order something new for Miss Eileen.'

"The child's mostly all she troubles her head about, since poor Mr. *Hume* died suddint, when it was six months old ; and that was how the step-mother got her so aisy persuaded out of Garnagort, lettin' on to her that the air didn't agree with it, when sorrow a much ailed it except cutting a couple of teeth.

"But ne'er a notion Mrs. *Hume* has that she does be livin' here on charity ; and a shame and a scandal it is, for th'ould master has plenty to keep the two of them, if he isn't a very rich man itself, compared to what all Mrs. *Hume*'s father owned before his big consarn went smash. That's the way it is with them tradespeople : they never can tell from one minute to the next whether

they'll be baggin' or beggin'. So it's no sort of business for gentlefolk to be meddlin' with, in my humble judgment, that had a right to leave it for them who has nothing else unless their bit of money to set themselves up with.

"They say Mrs. Hume's father kep' over twenty race-horses and pleasure-horses, and three men to be mindin' every separate one of them, same as if they were so many elephants. And to my certain knowledge the jewels she herself had, there was nothin' to aquil, unless it might be the sun shinin' off the water in a slant; they'd make the sight unsteady in your eyes. Gone the most of them is to the creditors; but there's a good few left yet. And by the same token, I could tell where they are at this minute of time, and that's what would surprise some I could name——"

Anastasia had spoken rapidly, as if clutching at a rare opportunity for discourse, but she now pulled herself up with an effort, like one running down a steep slope.

"I'm ashamed to be delayin' you, sir," she said. "Belike I had a right to let a shout to your driver."

With the feelings of a traveller who would fain depart hastily from a spot where avalanches appear imminent, Christy said that they would go to the car, and he was setting off when Michael caused a further delay. Taking from his pocket a very small silver whistle, he handed it to Anastasia, saying :

"I wish you would give it to the little girl inside.

She's only a baby : but there wasn't light enough to see that she had no sense."

"I'm afraid, sir, that she might be puttin' it in her mouth, and chokin' herself," said Anastasia.

"It has a ring on one end of it," Michael said gravely. "You can put a long string through that, and tie it to the leg of a chair or a table, and then she couldn't swallow the whistle, unless she swallowed the chair or the table too."

"Very well, sir," Anastasia said with much respect.

"And you might come again some day, and teach her how to whistle," Christy suggested, pleased at this sign of returning animation.

Michael nodded ambiguously.

"I *might*," he said. "But it's not that I like her a bit. I don't like anybody now. And I didn't hunt her in under the table ; she went of herself."

Thus the gift, Christy perceived, was prompted by remorse, and though he could have wished for some more cheerful sentiment, he still thought it a favourable symptom.

"'Twould be a Christian charity," Anastasia said, "if the young gentleman come of an odd while, for Miss Eileen never sees a livin' bein' of her own size at all, unless the little dog ; and rael unraisonable she's apt to be growin' up, with us hero spoilin' and humourin' her every hour of the day and night."

Standing at the gate, she regretfully watched the

visitors away. Her long streamers still fluttered whitely on the gathering dusk as the car wheeled out of view.

This call upon the oldest inhabitant left Christy in some perplexity, which further investigations did not by any means remove. It was clear that The Independency had been induced to receive an inmate whose circumstances should not have qualified her for admission.

There could be no doubt that Mrs. Hume Willes-ter's father-in-law was well able to provide amply for his only son's widow and child, and would have done so willingly, had not the second wife intervened. Moreover, it was almost equally clear that she had designedly palmed herself off as the candidate, though nobody could say to what extent her stratagem had been furthered by the egregious incompetence of Allen Verold.

Nevertheless, Christy did not see how he could bring his knowledge of these facts to bear upon the present case. The anxiety of the Foundress to preserve the unrestricted freedom of her pensioners had made difficult any interference with them from outside the gates of their precincts. Once admitted, they might order their households very much as they pleased. And not only so, but further complications here existed.

"You see," Christy explained to his co-trustees, "the condition of Allen's ingenious widow's unfortunate old husband is now such that he could do nothing in favour of the mother and child without

risk of litigation on the part of that hag, which it would not be worth while to incur."

He might have added that in his own opinion the poor girl had better stay where she was, seeming so little likely to cope successfully with the business puzzles rife in the wider world.

His views were adopted by Georgie Verold who, soon afterwards returning, at once set up young Mrs. Willester as a sort of fetish and romantic heroine.

Eileen, the pretty and droll, was spoilt more than ever; and Anastasia MacElvery's conversational gifts were encouraged by the frequent presence of an interested listener, though in Miss Verold she did not confide with all the frankness that had marked her pent-up communications to Mr. Considine.

No worse consequences seemed, at the outset, to threaten; but it was generally believed in the neighbourhood that Mrs. Willester had £12,000 a year of her own, and the best of bad reasons for seeking the seclusion of The Half-Square.

## CHAPTER IV

### A SELF-APPOINTED GUARDIAN

ABOUT two months after Christopher Considine's return Nicholas Garvin appeared at Clonmalin. He arrived one morning on the top of a baker's cart, which had given him a lift, and the master of the house was first made aware of his presence by coming upon him in the back hall, engaged in what he called "putting a hand to the clockwork contraptions of Master Michael's toy steamer." As he did so he crooned a murmurous lay, the burden of which was that we are wandering through a strange world, and must be content with what strange things we meet on the way.

This oft-repeated ditty very soon became a usual household sound, for it accompanied Garvin wherever he went, and there were few places whither he did not go at one time or another, his gift for putting a hand to things being much in request. The smooth swiftness with which he took up his new position was really remarkable. After a few days everybody regarded Nicholas Garvin, spare, grizzled, and sunburnt, as part and parcel of the establishment, essential and familiar. His adapta-



bility no doubt came partly of much experience in accommodating himself to different circumstances. Many were the posts he had filled since first he left the little lime-white house on the green shore of Lough Paddy O'Flynn.

He had been, among other things, a sailor boy and a soldier man, a carpenter, a navvy, and a valet. But the longest, as well as the last of his varying phases, had been that of general handy man to Gerald Dormer, whose service he had entered some ten years back at Pau, on the death of an invalid master. With the Dormers he had gone to St. Petersburg, and thence to Valenkschhof, Gerald having relinquished the diplomatic service for ventures in mines, and in his capacity of general factotum he had observed the family's growing wealth and dwindling concord until the final crash, the cause of which was no secret from him. The last words ever spoken in this world by Gerald Dormer were heard by Nicholas Garvin, and by him alone.

In his new domicile things were certainly the livelier for his coming. His spirit of restless energy and reckless cheerfulness sent a stir through the big house, where there was, in fact, so little to be done that everybody did as much less as possible.

To small Michael the reunion with this one old friend made more difference, and at first his joy seemed almost disproportionately great; then a reaction set in, and he relapsed into a deeper despondency, as if at the flickering out of some

suddenly kindled hope, but soon afterwards recovered himself, his spirits attaining a higher level than before that rise and fall. The charge of Michael was Garvin's official duty, and its performance often brought him to Mrs. Willester's dwelling in The Half-Square.

At first this used to be the goal of their walks, in accordance with Michael's wish, for he took a shadowy sort of pleasure in transferring toys from his own store to that of Eileen the baby, whom he now viewed with a tolerance, carefully cultivated in the place of his former rash judgment. Her mother was more positively to his liking, chiefly because she seemed instinctively to understand his wish that no claims should be made on his attention, haling him back from whatever absent-minded refuge he might have found. Through many a wintry afternoon they sat on either side of the little sitting-room fire, in a sort of forlorn content, while Eileen and Wisp, the Skye, played discursively about the floor.

In the adjoining kitchen, at such times, a more loquacious quartette would generally be assembled, composed of black and shaggy little Ruffian, Minnie, a plain grey and white cat, Nicholas Garvin, and Anastasia MacElvery.

Deeply resenting the dog's intrusion, Minnie sat gathered up austerely, watching him with a scowl which kept him from indiscreetly shortening the radius of his gyrations round her. The other hostess was more sociable, being well pleased to

entertain one whom she respected as a distinguished traveller, and whose adventures interested her vastly, though by her own volubility she sometimes debarred herself from hearing them related.

However, on one afternoon, when the season had begun to turn towards spring in the vague, dreamy manner of waning February, Garvin came resolved that his affairs should be the main topic of conversation, and he had no difficulty in bringing this about. He was seated on the kitchen table, repairing with twisted wire the handle of a coffee-strainer, when he suddenly said :

“ Miss Dormer has me heart-scalded.”

Anastasia, who was making toast, whirled round at this, fork in hand, to say :

“ And what ails herself, whoever she may be ? ”

“ There’s nothing ailing her at the present minute,” said Garvin; “ but I’m thinkin’ she mayn’t be so.”

“ It’s the first ever I heard tell of her, anyway,” Anastasia said pointedly.

“ About tellin’ you, I am,” said Garvin, “ and it’s what I wouldn’t be doin’, if I wasn’t after hearin’ a good bit of *talk* out of you ; but little or no *gabbin’*—if you understand, Signorina ? ”

Anastasia understood well enough, and was also agreeably impressed by being called “ Signorina,” one among the few traces of his foreign sojourning which Garvin allowed to appear in his manner of speech. She replied with some complacency :

"'Twould be the quare stupid body who hadn't that much wit."

"Them that do be talkin' foolish," Garvin continued, "is bound to be short of sinse, that's sure. But for anything one can tell, them that sits like so many stuck pigs, wid never a word out of them, mayn't have e'er a ha'p'orth more. Bletherin' the greatest ould nonsense at all they might be, if ever they took and opened their mouths. I don't hold wid the notion that keepin' them shut's the only way of keepin' a secret, same as folk that consait a man can't be sober unless he's dry for want of a sup. Give me a body wid plenty to say for herself, of the right sort, and noways apt to trouble herself wid romancin' about what doesn't consarn her."

"Not a bit of her would, sure enough," said Anastasia, enabled by the general terms of Garvin's eulogium to assent without any appearance of undue self-approbation.

"Then it's not lettin' on, you'll be, anything I happint to mention about Miss Dormer?" said Garvin.

"A word will I no more than I would this minute, when the name of her's all I can tell," said Anastasia.

"Sister she is to the little chap within there—Master Michael," Garvin said, with a backward jerk of his elbow in the direction of the sitting-room.

"Is she so?" said Anastasia. "Sure I was

thinkin' they said that the father and mother and sister, and every one belongin' to the poor little gentleman, had died on him a while ago."

"The father of him's dead right enough," said Garvin, "and the mother's no better than the same. But as for the sister, after killin' her meself I am; that's all that's happint her."

"You're the quare man," Anastasia said, with startled incredulity.

"Plenty quarer than meself there are, Signorina Anastasia," said Garvin. "And 'twas to be savin' the life of her I kilt her, morebetoken, divil a thing else. . . . Wait now till I tell you the way it was. And a grand bit of toast you'll have burnt to a cinder by then, that's smokin' away this minute like Mount Vesuvius."

Anastasia rapidly stuck up her slice of bread, already badly charred at one corner, out of harm's way on the hob, and faced round to listen, merely remarking briefly:

"Yourself may have the aitin' of it."

Said Garvin:

"It wasn't yesterday nor yet the day before that the troubles began between the master and mistress; that I've raison to know well. But what all might have been at the bottom of them isn't so aisy to say—differint things, belike. Only I've no manner of doubt, in me mind, that part of the divilment was ould Mrs. Dormer and her daughter, the mother of the master, and his sister. You see, the two of them had took a turn in their

religion, and when folks do that, very apt they are to have their minds set on turnin' other people the same way."

"Great votyeens them sort do be," said Anastasia. "Makin' up for lost time, belike. And mostly middling unpleasant, accordin' to me own experience."

"Well, these ones," said Garvin, "had the notion that they might have got Mr. Dormer, if it wasn't only for the wife bein' agin it. So that set them agin *her*. And then they would be makin' offers at the childer, or else she'd consait they were, which came to the same thing. And the master thought a dale of ould Mrs. Dormer, and she and Miss Beatrice kep' follyin' us about when we were on the move, that gave no satisfaction at all. Snappin' and yappin' they were continual, and holy-groanin' now and agin. But we weren't rightly set up till the time somethin' better than a twelvemonth back, when the master went travellin' to see after some of his mines, and left us in Rome. For he wasn't quit any while till there come along one of them chaps that do be singin' in the theatres—singin' they may call it, but accordin' to my notions, you might as well be shakin' up stones agin one another in a sack, for any tune they have, with their ow-ow-ow-owy-ow, and they tryin' to work themselves headforemost out of their coats, till the eyes of them is rowlin' in their sockets."

Garvin here suited the action to the word so



vigorously that he almost slipped off the table, but recovering his balance with a wild prance, continued his story :

“Howsomever, there was nothin’ supposed to be the aquil of this little oily-lookin’ fellow, with a face on him the colour of an underdone potato-cake; and you’d wonder to see all the ladies carryin’ on, sortin’ flowers out of their bouquets to whirl down at him, and talkin’ foolishness fit to surprise the crows in the trees about their dear, delightful tenor, and the heavenly howls he did be lettin’.

“Well now, Signorina Anastasia, accordin’ to my belief, not an atom worse than the rest of them would the mistress have been, if it wasn’t only for ould Mrs. Dormer and Miss Beatrice, that took and stuck themselves in an apartment right opposite ours, the way they could keep on spyin’ and meddlin’ and mischief-makin’. For what did they presently go do but write some story or other to the poor master that brought him racin’ back, like one demented, in the middle of a quare blizzard of a snowstorm, and he with a heavy cold on him at the time. So a great row entirely he and she had in the big salon, before he so much as took off his overcoat; and the end of it was that the next day out she went with Miss Minette—Miss Dormer—and Sandra Villandi the maid, by way of gettin’ the child’s photograph done: but never a foot a one of them came back. And the next news we had of them, away they were in

Switzerland, and the little singing chap along with them."

"Be among us!" said Anastasia.

"You may say that," said Garvin. "And there was the master not able to stir hand or foot to go after them, with the cold settled on his chest. All he could do when he riz up was to be droppin' in a heap on the floor. So lyin' in his bed he was, frettin' his heart into fiddlestrings about Miss Minette more particularly, that he thought a quare dale of. And between one thing and another, in a couple of days he got that bad the doctors gave him over altogether.

"Well now, one mornin', when I was in his room, he sent the nurse to fetch his mother to him, and as soon as she came along with Miss Beatrice—that he'd as lief had stayed away, I'm thinkin'—he began talkin' about Miss Minette. 'Tis yourself, mother,' says he, 'will have to look after her when we get her back, for I'll be out of it,' says he. And cryin' woeful she was at that, the crathur, she bein' fairly wrapped up in the master. But says he: 'The best thing you can do, the first minute it's possible,' says, he, 'will be to put her in the convent along with Louise.' For you must know his other sister was a professed nun in a Carmelite convent at Liège.

"Bedad now, at that hearin' you might ha' thought the two of them was about leppin' out of their skins. And: 'Thanks be to God for that word,' says the ould lady, and she liftin' up her

two hands joined in one above her head. 'A blessed day 'twill be when we have that dear child's voice, too, rising up day and night in intercession for us, lengthening and strengthening the golden chain of my own darling's holy prayers,' says she. 'It's no holy chains I'm thinking of,' says the master, tired like, 'but just that there seems to be no surer way of keeping her from disgracing herself and our name.'

"If you seen the size of the crathur, you'd think it was the comical talk to have about her. 'We must strain every bone in our bodies now to be gettin' her out of the clutches of that miserable woman,' says Miss Beatrice, that could never abide her sister-in-law at all. 'And, please God, one of these days my dear boy may have the happiness of seeing his daughter dedicating herself to heaven,' says the ould lady, looking hopeful at him, and he with death in his face, and she houlding on to his hand. And that afternoon she gave me her own hand full of gold and silver to be putting for her into one of the poor-boxes there is stuck between the half-pillars in front of the big church just round the corner from our house. A thank-offering she said it was.

"Well, by that time one of the detectives they had trackin' the mistress brought back word that they'd found her and the rest stoppin' at Geneva, and that Miss Minette was laid up with somethin' of the nature of bronchitis, not very bad. So nothin' would suit the master except that I should

travel off there, to be fetchin' her home as soon as she was mended. Noways wishful I was to be leavin' him then, but he'd set his heart on me startin' the next day, and that way we settled it. More than a trifle better he seemed, too, and aisier in his mind.

"But that night I was sittin' up with him meself, thinkin' I could be sleepin' plenty, and I goin' along in the train. And something past twelve o'clock, after he was lyin' quiet for a good bit, he calls me over to him, and says he: 'Garvin, it's Miss Minette I'm thinkin' about,' says he. 'They mustn't be makin' a nun of her, whatever I said a while ago. 'Twould be a cruel bad turn to do again the child,' says he. 'Bedad, you're right there, sir,' says I, 'it would so.' 'I dunno what come over me to say it,' says he; 'some devil, like enough, and I wish to God that I'd quit out of this first.' 'Let me send and fetch Mrs. Dormer to your Honour,' says I, 'the way you can be tellin' her. 'Twas just bothered in your head you were.' 'Too late it is now,' says he. 'There wouldn't be time.'

"And to be sure I seen he was lookin' mortal bad. What to be at I didn't rightly know; but says I to him, I'd set it down on a bit of paper, and then he could put his name to it. 'For they'll be bound to mind that,' says I. 'I'll try,' says he, 'if you're quick about it.' So I got hould of an ould doctor's prescription, and I scrawmed on the back of it: *I wish my daughter Hermione to be brought up Protestant, and to not be any sort of*

*nun*. You may depend I made all the haste I could, and when I gave him the pencil in his hand, just an offer he made to grip it, but out it dropped; and, me dear, before 'twas finished rollin' over the smooth of the floor, the soul was out of his body."

"God be good to him," said Anastasia. "Sure now, 'twas twenty pities he couldn't stop a minyit longer."

"All manner of pities it was," said Garvin, "for I very well knew that them two ladies wouldn't ever believe, or let on to believe, a word I said about the matter, even supposin' they'd pay any attention to the master's name itself—they might have to by law. But anyhow, there was the scrap of paper not a ha'porth of use, so I kep' me own counsel, and off I went to Geneva the day of the funeral, for her grandmother's and aunt's minds were set on gettin' back Miss Minette as quick as they could. Talk they had of puttin' her in a convent school. Well, I wasn't long findin' her there, and she not able to be up yet; but ne'er a bit of her mother was in it, that had slipped away, where to Sandra couldn't tell, but not along with the little singer. 'Twas by no wish of hers, it seems he follied them."

"It's very little nature she had in her, then," said Anastasia, "to be runnin' away and lavin' a child sick in bed."

"What you may call flighty she was ever, in my judgment," said Garvin, "forby bein' half an Italian; and she knew, belike, that she couldn't

ould on to Miss Minette. Anyhow, Miss Dormer she is by rights, bein' the master's daughter, and he the head of the family, however Miss Beatrice may set herself up. But the notion I took, when I seen the crathur lyin' there, was that what with them who left her goin' to loss in the width of the world, and them that were for shuttin' her up tight in a box like, a better chance she might have away out of this altogether. And after that, again, the notion got stuck on to it that the next best thing would be to put it about that she was after dyin', and then to take charge of her meself."

"A quare notion it was," remarked Anastasia.

"Quare or no," said Garvin, with a tinge of defiance in his tone, "that's what I done. 'Twould be bringin' you round by too long a road if I was tellin' you all the ins and outs; but the short cut to the end of it is that I contrived the whole thing ready enough. A couple of big rogues there was in it at Geneva, uncommon handy, that gave me an iligant little burial certificate, with the name and all wrote in, to be sendin' to the ladies at Rome—and only a few francs they charged for it either.

"And by good luck I was wanted to see after some of the master's business at his place in the south of Russia; so I brought Miss Dormer and Sandra along with me, and there I kep' them till Mr. Considine and Master Michael was come over here, and ould Mrs. Dormer and Miss Beatrice



had gone to live in Brussels. After that I thought this country would be the best place for us."

"And where might you have the young lady now?" said Anastasia. "And is it herself that the little gentleman does be frettin' after in the opinion he'll see her no more? A cruel pity it is to be deceivin' and tormentin' him."

"A pity it is to be sure," said Garvin, "and bad I think of it some whiles. But if the two of them was to be parted all the days of their lives, anyhow, it makes no great differ. He may forget her quicker this way. Partly sorry I am, too, for the ould lady; only, tellin' you the truth, she's a selfish ould crathur, and just wants to be turnin' Miss Minette into a sort of prayin'-wheel, like ones I seen out in India, for themselves and their sowls. Divil a thing else she minds."

"It's much if any ould body would live long enough to make a nun of your Miss Minette," Anastasia said, "unless she's a dale bigger than Master Michael."

"A couple of year or so oulder she is," said Garvin, "but ne'er an atom bigger. The image she is of the poor master, in a small size, with a great look of the mother lightin' her up, so to spake. And as quiet and wild as a little bird out in the woods, takin' a wonderful pleasure with herself in all manner of things. What good would her life be to her, if they wouldn't let her out and about? And even supposin' ould Mrs. Dormer quit, as you was sayin', there'd be Miss Beatrice,

all the one thing. Shut up in school they'd keep her, till she hadn't a bit of sense left; and thin what chance would she have?

"But you was axin' me, Miss, where she is now. It's at a little place near Bantry she and Sandra are, with some very respectable people. A trifle expensive it comes; how-an-e'er, that's no great matter. The poor master left me a hundred pound, besides puttin' a bit of money I had saved into a grand payin' company for me, so between that and me wages I'm well able to keep her dacint, no fear. But what bothers me now is that Sandra won't be content to stop where they are by any manner of means. She says she'll never get her health livin' in a country where the sun's dropped out of the sky, and 'tis my belief that if I don't let her go back to her own place in Sicily, she'll do no good, for I notice her grown very yellow and wizened-lookin'.

"Only then I dunno how I'm to manage about Miss Dormer. Leave her alone at Pallestown I couldn't, and I've no knowledge in this country, that I'm so long livin' away from, of any other people I'd be satisfied to trust with her; so I was thinkin', Signorina, that maybe you could tell me of some rael respectable people, the same as yourself, not too far from here entirely, who would be willin' to take charge of her. For I'd put a dale of confidence in anybody you recommended, always supposin' you'd have aught to do with us."

Anastasia reflected for a while before she replied, and then she said nothing more conclusive than :

“ Well now, that’s a surprisin’ sort of a story.”

“ Surprisin’ it is ; I don’t deny it,” said Garvin. “ But sure, miss, it’s a strange world that we are wanderin’ through, and surprisin’ things is only what we had a right to expect.”

Once more Anastasia meditated silently, while Garvin watched for her decision with the air of a terrier on the look-out for a doubtful bone. At last she said :

“ I wouldn’t say there isn’t a place in me eye might be apt to answer right enough for what you’re wantin’, but I’d liefer give the matter a turn-over in me mind before I come to a determination about takin’ hand or part in it. I wouldn’t wonder if you were here again to-morrow or next day ; so then I could be tellin’ you.”

“ Well and good ; I’m satisfied,” said Garvin. “ Here we’ll be to-morrow, you may depend. And by the same token, it’s time now I was fetchin’ Master Michael, and steppin’ home. So good-night to you kindly, Signorina Anastasia.”

He slipped off the table and left the room, followed by Ruffian, who covered his retreat by a weather-eye fixed warily on the curled-up cat, and a menacing growl. But Anastasia had hardly resumed her toasting-fork when a head was hastily thrust in at the door, and the voice of Garvin said :

“ Them Carmelite nuns is the kind that do be

rowlin' theirselves up in black bags, all but just the blink of one eye. And sleepin' in their coffins they do be, I'm tould, and diggin' spadefuls out of their graves every day. If it wasn't for the name of the thing, Miss, they might as well take and bury her alive."

This last effort at persuasion being accomplished, he finally withdrew.

And on the morrow, whether or no in any degree as a result of it, Anastasia gave him her answer to his request.

"The place I was thinkin' might suit you, Mr. Garvin," she said, "is where I come from in the county Limerick, no such great way off, but not over-convenient to them you would as soon not have very near it. A nice cousin of me own there is in it that I know all the days of me life, and I wouldn't wonder if she would be plased to have the charge of little Miss Dormer. Of course I couldn't say anything for sartin until I ax her; but if I took a day's holiday I could go see her meself and find out about it."

"First-rate that 'ud be," said Garvin, looking up alertly, as if a depressing load had been lifted off him. "And whatever happens, Signorina, I'll never forget the good turn you done us—troth will I not, you may depend. Sure now, little Miss Eileen there is lookin' iligant to-day; the bit of blue ribbon you have run through her hair sets her off finely. And I wouldn't say but she's gettin a trifle less bulky like in herself, Signorina.

Slim enough she'll be, after all, I wouldn't wonder, when she's took another few starts at growin'."

This forecast was not so irrelevant to the matter in hand as it might, on the face of it, appear to be. The fact was that the respective claims to good looks of Miss Eileen and Master Michael were a point upon which Anastasia and Nicholas rather often and acrimoniously differed, Anastasia objecting to Nicholas's charge that he had no more on his bones than a spring chicken, and a face all eyes like an owl, while Nicholas retorted with animadversions on the excessive plumpness of Miss Eileen, whom he pronounced apt to develop "a mighty clumsy figure." His more favourable criticism now was the expression of gratitude sincere, though not unmixed with hope of further assistance; and Anastasia fully appreciated it.

"I'd like to know of any things you *would* wonder at, Mr. Garvin, if so be it didn't suit your purpose," she said drily. "And I'm sorry you think Miss Eileen looks anyways different from usual, when people passing on the road do be remarking that a finer child they never laid eyes on."

At which hearing Nicholas withdrew, for he felt that he could not pursue the subject with any probable advantage either to himself or his ward.

## CHAPTER V

### THE TRAGEDY AT DRUMKYLE

EAST and west runs the long oval of Glenoona valley, threaded by a river which comes down the Devil's Ladder at its west end, where the hills rimming it to north and south join a high-tossed mountain-range. Clear, nut-brown waters, bearing swirls of creamy froth, run swiftly in the river, for it has flowed through mountainy peat. A more open country broadens out gradually along its banks to the eastward: grasslands and bog-lands, large, smooth pastures and little ploughed fields. The southern hills rise more abruptly than the northern, and are bleaker. Their chequer-work of ground under tillage is composed of patches absurdly small, and often impossibly steep.

To a colossal immigrant from some more spacious planet the white cabins perched here and there on projecting ledges might suggest crockery stowed away on shelves, and more of the same might seem to be set out on the level ground towards the middle of the glen, where church, chapel, school, police-barracks, three or four two-storied houses, and perhaps a dozen thatched cottages, in a double



row, form the town of Allenmore. But, softer in outline and greener in hue, the northern hills shelter from any such belittling comparisons the few residences of gentility which are hidden among the belts of timber on their lowest slopes.

One of these dwellings has for several generations shown its chimney-stacks over the rounded tree-tops to the right of anybody who enters Glenoona at the unenclosed end, that is from the direction of Dermotstown, twenty miles away. It is a large old mansion, with an imposing pillared front, built in its own miniature valley, the sides of which are wooded up to the crest of the protecting ridge.

Indisputably it is the big house of that neighbourhood, as its owners, the Nugents, were the great people; nevertheless, when she married the Sir Philip in possession, Lady Olive Bourchier did not feel that she had done by any means brilliantly well for herself. Though her fortune was small, her good looks and social position should have entitled her to something better, from a worldly point of view, than an Irish landlord with a much-encumbered estate and a knighthood. She permitted herself, however, to be influenced by other considerations, and did not, on the whole, regret it.

But when she was early widowed her ambitions reasserted themselves on behalf of her only child, a son. They gained a strength, indeed, which they had never formerly possessed, because, as they now regarded a second person, albeit one whose interests she identified with her own, she could cherish the

delusion that she was actuated by really unselfish motives. Such a delusion provides its owner with a licence to carry weapons that often make him a formidable neighbour.

Thus Lady Olive was ready to plan and plot for the advancement of her Claude with an indefatigable zeal, and, it must be added, an unscrupulousness which she would not have used more directly on her own account.

Always a prospective person, she had begun, while Claude was still too small for school, to dream of a political career for him ; and long before his school-days ended she had been taking careful, practical steps towards its accomplishment, keeping up valuable connections and acquaintances, letting drop a few that seemed less desirable, and, in general, spinning round her, socially, a floating mesh of purposeful threads, to be manipulated as circumstances might require.

These activities were all carried on at a distance from out-of-the-way Glenoona, which was by no means conveniently situated for business of the kind ; and therefore, during many years after Sir Philip's death, Drumkyle Park seldom had a visit from its owners. Lady Olive congratulated herself on having been able to secure a thoroughly trustworthy caretaker for the large, deserted house, which contained some valuable property.

This she had done through the Arfelds, the people of her youngest sister Dorothy's husband. It did not often happen that she had any complacent

feelings in connection with them ; on the contrary, she was somewhat subject to twinges of self-reproach, because it had been at Drumkyle that seventeen-year-old Dorothy met with Henry Arfeld, and so hurried into a marriage by many degrees less advantageous than even Lady Olive's own.

The Arfelds' fortunes had been on the wane almost ever since their first establishment at Glenoona, in the days of Queen Anne, when they had arrived there among some of those fugitives from the Palatinate, who had fled before the French invaders, and whom the English government had settled on grants of Irish, other people's, land. As persons of some quality and importance in their native land, and not without friends at the English court, the Arfelds had acquired a proportionately extensive demesne, near the western end of the glen, where they ranked among the great folks of that countryside.

But things had very soon begun to go against them. Unprofitable investments, unhappy marriages, feeble health in heads of the family, had combined, with more general bad times, to spin a web of adversity, which gradually darkened round them, so that the days of Victoria found them in an impoverished, struggling state. Moreover Henry, a younger son, was not even heir to their shrunken property. Still, from this unpromising quarter Lady Olive had derived a real benefit in the bringing to her notice of Elizabeth Cramer.

Humble compatriots of the Arfelds, the Cramers

were one of the families who formed the little Palatinate settlement in Glenoona, and they had prospered there in a small way. The men had industriously tilled their bit of land, the women had nowise neglected their housewifely duties, and supernumerary members of the household had often found employment with their neighbours up at the Hall, to both parties' satisfaction.

Thus an intimacy of several generations' standing had existed between the two families, and at this time Elizabeth Cramer was in high favour with the Arfeld ladies. By birth she was half a Cramer, half a MacElvery, and after her marriage with a distant cousin had been left a youngish widow, possessing one little girl. A home and occupation were needed by her just when Lady Olive Nugent was in search of some one who should live as caretaker at Drumkyle Park, and the highest of characters from the Hall led her to engage Elizabeth in that capacity.

The arrangement turned out very well, and continued without mishap for some years; but then a melancholy event befell. Little Molly died, a loss which so afflicted her mother that she at first seemed likely to give up her situation, and wander off in restless misery from the scene of her sorrow. Elizabeth's friends thought that the best chance of dissuading her from such a course lay in providing her with another child to take charge of and spoil, for they all shared the opinion which was expressed by her mother-in-law: "It isn't in the

nature of the creature to not be making much of any live thing that comes near her ; and once she takes to that, she's apt to content her mind with it, in a way." So, Lady Olive's consent to the introduction of "a quiet little girl" having been willingly granted, the next step was the discovery of a suitable child. But at first none seemed to be easily forthcoming.

It was at this point that Anastasia MacElvery intervened, and became instrumental in linking together the histories of certain households at Rathkennen and Glenoona. The Felix MacElverys and the John MacElverys both were near neighbours as well as family connections of the Cramers, and Anastasia's friendship with her cousin Elizabeth was of very long standing.

They had seldom been separated until Anastasia, more from a wish for change than from any necessity, as her people were fairly well-to-do, had migrated to Dublin with the widowed Mrs. Arfeld. Though Anastasia had, as she said herself, no great love or liking for her mistress, by whose speedy remarriage to old Mr. Willester she was somewhat scandalised, she had found such a charm in the baby Eileen, his granddaughter, and her young mother, that she had accompanied them indignantly to what she often called their "bit of a gimcrack almshouse" in The Half-Square.

The news of Elizabeth's loss had reached her there shortly before Nicholas Garvin confided to her the story of his difficulties ; whereupon, as we



have seen, she was struck by the idea that his forlorn little Miss Dormer, whom his narrative represented as quiet, and simply pleased, but otherwise much to be pitied, might prove an appropriate charge for lonely Elizabeth Cramer.

In Anastasia's mind ideas were apt to grow apace, ripening rapidly if fruitful, and if not withering quickly out of existence. This one soon developed many promising features. It would be well, she thought, if Elizabeth's new companion should avoid rousing sad memories by much resemblance to Molly; and by all accounts Miss Dormer was a very different sort of child.

Again, her father's last injunctions about her bringing up were respected by the fact that Elizabeth was a Protestant, while she had had schooling enough to relieve Nicholas Garvin's anxiety about the education of his ward.

"Me cousin was always a beautiful reader and writer, and a great hand at teachin'," Anastasia assured him, "though indeed if, as you say, the young lady does be speakin' mostly Italian and French, the first thing she has a right to learn is to talk like other people. Then, when she has the readin' and writin' along with the foreign languages, I don't see what else much she could want, unless it was a bit of music or singin'."

"Is it music?" said Nicholas. "Bedad now, the less she has to do with that, the better I'd be plased."

"Well, an odd scrape of an ould fiddle's the



most she's likely to hear in Glenoona," said Anastasia. "But what, now, am I to be tellin' Mrs. Cramer about her? I can't be givin' her real name, on account of the other folk that's in it. Me cousin herself wouldn't be talkin' if she knew the ins and outs of everything that's happened since the world began. I'll say that for her."

"It's a big word," Nicholas said; and then he pondered for a while.

Anastasia, on the eve of her expedition to Glenoona, was consulting him about the course she should adopt there. At last he resumed:

"You might say she's daughter to a friend of mine that died in furrin parts. That 'ud be the truth in a way, for the poor master and I was ever friendly enough, and his heart did be set on little Miss Dormer. Well now, a while ago, who'd have had a notion that there'd be nobody unless meself to look after her? A strange world she's got to be wanderin' through, sure enough; but better off she is, even so, than shut up along wid them ould black nuns. As sartin of that I am as of me own name. And as for what they're to be callin' her, Miss, we must just think of something different to tell them. I'd liefer it wasn't anything too common-sounding entirely."

"I'll say she's Miss Minnie Ree; that's a handy little name, and maybe not too common altogether, considerin' 'tis the Irish for King," Anastasia said, not without a touch of sarcasm; but Nicholas accepted the suggestion quite seriously.

"If you find your cousin agreeable to it," he said, "I'll travel down meself to see her next week; and then, suppose the place seems apt to suit, I could bring Miss Minette, and give it a trial, at all events."

"Well and good," said Anastasia.

The negotiations with Mrs. Cramer were successfully carried on, and so expeditiously that spring was still young when Nicholas left Minnie Ree happily established at Drumkyle Park. His chagrin at being unable to do more than obscurely hint at what he regarded as the important social position of Mr. Dormer's daughter was mitigated by Mrs. Cramer's readiness to adopt his own ostentatiously deferential attitude towards the child, whom she spoke of as "the young lady," and addressed with all due respect.

Most people would have considered the kindness of her manner, and the liking which it clearly showed, of more consequence as a forecast of her charge's welfare, but this was not the view entertained by Nicholas, who constantly dreaded lest he should prove to have brought little Miss Dormer permanently down in the world.

As for Minnie herself, the situation pleased her well. She was too familiar with changes in her surroundings to feel dismayed by strange people and places; and the spacious, quiet house and precincts of Drumkyle were very much to her taste.

In those days the materials requisite for her contentment were few and simple, consisting mainly

of undisturbed indulgence in solitary meditations. When they could be carried on among scenes as conducive to uninterrupted fantasies as were the wide-floored chambers and wooded walks that she found at her latest home, her time passed pleasantly indeed.

Though she could not fairly have been called selfish, she was undoubtedly in a high degree self-absorbed, preferring her own society to any other, and requiting with nothing more than a passive amiability the active feelings of regard which were bestowed upon her by many of her acquaintances. Some charm in her possession won them without any effort or even consciousness on her part.

Thus she had been entirely unaware of her small brother Michael's devotion, which had made it a red-letter day for him if they came more than usually into one another's society. On such occasions her habit was to slip away by herself as soon as possible, without a surmise that her going would cause any disappointment.

Her natural disposition to be interested more by fancies than by facts made her slow about forming attachments to real persons and things, and her opportunities for doing so were further diminished by a wandering life, which continually brought her among new faces, principally of attendants, who shifted away before they had made much impression on her pre-occupied mind.

Towards her caretakers Miss Minette com-

ported herself with a good-tempered docility, gaining her the best of characters, and disguising the indifference, which, if suspected, would have been disapproved. Seldom only was she drawn into any keen sympathy with her neighbours, and this, as it happened, when they were objects of commiseration.

Once, for example, on seeing Michael vexed at some accident to a toy, she had brought out to console him her most valued trinket, a golden gossamer web, spun over an enamelled ivy leaf, bespangled with diamond dew, and enmeshing a ruby and sapphire fly. This rather incongruous gift became Michael's treasure, so dearly prized that, frail as it was, it never sustained any damage from his handling.

Few incidents of the kind, however, came under her notice during her first nine years; and she had lived for a twelvemonth at Drumkyle Park before a rent, large and not soon to close, was made in the dreamy veil that floated between her and the realities of life.

It was brought about by her coming into contact with the Nugents. For a long time, longer indeed than the little girl's whole life, their affairs had been in a prosperous state. As her Claude passed through childhood and boyhood, Lady Olive gained assurance, beyond the possibility of mere maternal delusions, that the lad possessed many qualities appropriate to the career which she desired for him. Good looks and agreeable manners were

his as well as the hardly more essential intellectual gifts, and the combination would enable him dexterously to grasp whatever opportunities the strong hand of influence might roll across his path:

One of these, in the shape of a desirable private secretaryship, awaited him, according to promise, as soon as he had attained his majority; and when that time approached Lady Olive arranged for a series of birthday festivities, including the presence of a brilliant house-party at Drumkyle.

But before it had assembled an untoward event befell. By one wet day's shooting in wintry, October weather Claude incurred a fierce attack of acute rheumatism, which came near killing him outright, and the effects of which were still regrettably apparent in the following May, when he returned home with his mother, much strengthened, indeed, by a sojourn at San Remo, yet even then, in the eyes of Glenoona, a melancholy spectacle, "creeping about on a stick like an old man of ninety or a hundred."

It would be much, some folks said, if he lived to see the celebrations which had been postponed till the autumn. And if anything happened to him the property was bound to go to some far-away sort of cousin, next to nothing to the family at all. "Twenty pities it was, and he such a fine, pleasant-spoken young gentleman."

Among these sympathising observers might be reckoned Mrs. Cramer's charge, little Minnie Ree. Before his illness Claude Nugent had paid a few



short visits to Drumkyle Park, on which occasions both he and his mother were attracted by the small, pretty child, who was as unobtrusive in her ways as a wren. They would take some trouble to keep her from slipping off when she met them, and to encourage her discourse, which pleased them with its shy quaintness, and an intonation musical and slightly foreign.

She herself regarded them at first with awe, because Mrs. Cramer thought them so very grand, and then with relief at finding that they were just the kind of people to whom she had been accustomed. Claude she preferred to Lady Olive; he was so good-natured and gay. Yet they made no strong impression upon her, and she thought little about them during the intervals between their visits.

But now their reappearance in such altered guise concerned and distressed her. The plight of Claude, crippled and dispirited, made her feel as she had done at Michael's grief for his spoiled yacht, only in a more melancholy way; and she understood well enough that *this* grief would not be consolable by any gift.

All she could do to show her sympathy was to be serviceable in running errands. Her wish to help developed her naturally somewhat restricted powers of observation, so that she became a most efficient fetcher and carrier, with quite a faculty for the finding of mislaid books, pencils, and other elusive property. These tasks were thankfully



entrusted to her by Claude, whom she spared many a moment of vexation.

Furthermore, he discovered that she spoke French and Italian with a remarkably good accent, besides reading aloud in those languages with an intelligence "beyond the reason of her youthful years," and he often beguiled a tedious hour by setting her to practise one or other of her accomplishments.

His mother looked on approvingly. As his complete recovery seemed now to be merely a matter of patience it soothed her eager, restless mind to consider that the time of his enforced idleness was not wholly thrown away. Increased fluency in foreign tongues might be found a very valuable asset, a consideration which disposed her all the more to encourage nice little Minnie.

But there was another of Claude's assistants whom Lady Olive viewed with much less satisfaction.

During their stay at San Remo, while his prospects were still so precarious, she had been well pleased that her old friend's orphan daughter, Elsie Hall, should help to cheer and occupy the invalid. It had become quite a matter of course that Elsie should act as his amanuensis, and constantly write out the notes for an essay on Heliodorus, with which, being a youth of scholarly tastes, he was solacing his captivity. That she had been able to stay with them nearly all the while they were abroad seemed a fortunate thing, and her coming

to spend a month at Drumkyle Park a much-desired event.

By the time that this engagement was to be fulfilled, however, Lady Olive's mood had changed. A single fear and hope no longer swallowed up all the others, which began to emerge together with her reviving plans.

These were, of course, in some degree concerned with Claude's marriage. Obviously, he must be provided, in due time, with a suitable wife. But the matter was not by any means an urgent one. Ten years hence would be quite soon enough, thought this queen-mother, who was in no haste to abdicate.

Meanwhile, even to look about with any sort of definiteness seemed altogether premature; precautionary steps alone could be either necessary or expedient, and for them Lady Olive saw little need. Among her various anxieties the fear matrimonial had been the last to recur, partly because it had never taken an acute form, and partly because Claude's slow convalescence still kept him far from dangerous company.

That Elsie Hall's could be otherwise than perfectly safe was a notion from which Lady Olive's mind had remained free until one day soon after their coming to Drumkyle, when, without any apparent reason, the doubt suddenly suggested itself. In a vague form, only, indeed, based on the general grounds that "one can't be too careful"; and at first it led to nothing more than a faint regret at

having given the invitation. For though a very nice girl, Elsie was obviously of no account socially or financially; she did not possess even the estimable gift of beauty, much less the potent spell of charm.

By such a daughter-in-law Lady Olive felt that a main channel of her ambitions would be permanently blocked. Still she said to herself that, happily, there were really no grounds whatever for apprehending anything of the kind—it *was* just that one couldn't be too careful—and she had seen more than half of Elsie's visit over before, suddenly, some intangible trifle, a tone or a look, woke into sleepless activity a menacing surmise.

Thenceforth the counted hours began to lag with cruel deliberation on their crawl towards that feverishly-desired departure. If Elsie's exit were once made without any definite declaration having taken place Lady Olive believed that she might regard the danger as fairly blown over.

It would be comparatively easy to devise counter-attractions and distractions, to co-operate with the efficacious out of sight out of mind. Even poor Claude's sadly unserviceable fingers would then be an advantage, in this way, by preventing any indiscreet correspondence: he would never dictate a love-letter.

She was fully conscious, however, that during the interval this peril must needs grow daily more and more intense; and hence she herself became more and more anxiously on the alert to stand

in the way of every threatening *tête-à-tête*, yet with the utmost inobtrusiveness, as she well knew how probably any overt precaution on her part might precipitate the dreaded catastrophe.

Things being so, one fine, late August afternoon it is easy to imagine with what feelings she heard Elsie and Claude agree at luncheon that they would devote the rest of this last day but one of her visit to looking over papers and notes up on the Firry Hill. It says much for her powers of automatic conversation that she was able to go on talking, without a hitch, about cutlets and flower-shows and the prospects of the shooting-season, while she mentally groped after some pretext for interference—vainly and desperately sought it, a paralytic seizure of the inventive powers holding her spell-bound until the elusive opportunity for action had almost slipped away from her.

It was at the very last moment that relief appeared in the shape of their week-end guest, Horace Purdon, whom she met, as she crossed the hall after luncheon, with Elsie, and who immediately enquired whether the latter were going to the Colthursts' lawn-tennis tournament. At this suggestion Lady Olive jumped with the alacrity of one who has narrowly escaped committing a disastrous piece of stupidity. How could she have forgotten that most opportune invitation?

"Oh, of course she is," she said, "and it is nearly time for you to start."

"But, dear Lady Olive," said Elsie, "you see

I've settled to do some copying for Claude this afternoon. And besides, I think it's rather hot for tennis."

"*Nonsense*, my dear," Lady Olive said, with perhaps a shade more emphasis than she intended, "there can't be the least hurry about that, and Claude certainly wouldn't wish to keep you; he must have forgotten the Colthursts'.

"I know that Claude has a large accumulation of notes to be written out," Elsie explained, "and we won't have much time to-morrow. I would much rather stay."

"No, no, my dear child," protested Lady Olive, "we can't possibly let you do that. And, in fact, I believe Claude will be much happier this fine afternoon just lounging with a novel and a cigar than poking over Greek. I thought he looked quite headachy at luncheon. Really, it is most kind of you to think of staying, my dear, but not a bit necessary."

Lady Olive just tinged her tone with something which she knew would preclude any further opposition from Elsie.

"You can have either the pony-trap or the car, if you don't care to walk. You'll take her across our fields, Mr. Purdon? Yes, that will be very pleasant, and I'll send something to meet you coming back. And here's little Minnie, Elsie, ready to fetch you anything you want from upstairs."

So by-and-by Claude's mother, watching her

possible-impossible daughter-in-law vanish down a long avenue, resolved, with a sigh of relief, to despatch her correspondence quickly, and then join her son, over whom she would mount guard diligently throughout the remaining hours of risk. She felt that her action had in all likelihood averted a grave calamity from her house.

About the same time Claude himself was making his way, with steps halting and slow, across a sun-smitten lawn, glad when its tree-clumps spread their shadow directly in his track. Presently he began to ascend a footpath winding steeply up the hillside through a fir-grove, where twice or thrice he sat down to regain breath on a flaky-barked rustic seat, with his feet among the faded, fallen needles, and the clean, resinous odour aromatic all round him. He had brought with him two or three small volumes and a writing-case, but he left them behind him on one of these seats, and never noticed their loss.

As he moved along he seemingly had something pleasant in view to charm his pained steps, for his pinched face, a fine-drawn study in black-and-white, looked eager and hopeful, the more vividly so, perhaps, because he could not express his feelings by quickening his pace. His tedious climb ended on the top of the low ridge, an open, grassy place, where flat boulders and tall furze-bushes offered shaded seats. There was a wide view to the southward over dimpled green fields, with a glimpse of some white lane or blink of the



many-looped river, running hither and thither among them.

Looking round him with satisfaction, he thought to himself that he had got up very well; yet he had taken at least five times as long, with ten times as much trouble, as he would have done that day twelvemonth. The conclusion which he drew from his increased agility was that he certainly had advanced far enough towards complete recovery to justify him in at last carrying out his long-cherished intention of telling Elsie Hall how indispensable she had become to him, and how futile a thing his life would seem without her.

As, earnestly hoping, he half believed that she would not take this communication amiss, he sat down in no despondent mood, and watched the opening in the fir-grove through which Elsie would presently follow him in fulfilment of her promise. She would be sure to arrive in a few minutes, and meanwhile it was very pleasant up there, airy yet sheltered; he had found a boulder with a broad, jutting ledge, just the thing for a desk.

Soon, however, he began to wonder at her non-appearance, and he went on wondering more and more, until it changed into fidgeting and fretting. Some inconvenient callers had probably detained her; he felt much aggrieved at the delay.

And when, before very long, after all, somebody did emerge from the sombre shadow of the firs it was only little Minnie Ree, in her white print frock sprinkled with a pattern of lilac roses.

By this time he had got up, and stood gazing over the country towards the west end of the Glen. His back was to the fir-grove; but he heard steps, and turned round with a start of joyful relief, which exposed him helplessly to a stab of disappointment. Then he called sharply to the child :

"Minnie, Minnie, look sharp and come here."

She ran and stood by him on the edge of the high, rocky bank.

"I've left my glasses at home," he said; "but you've got good eyes. Who are those two people crossing the field—over there between the road and the river?"

"Elsie and Mr. Purdon," Minnie answered promptly.

"Are you sure it's Elsie?" asked Claude.

"Sure I am and certain," said Minnie. "Don't you see her curled-up hat, and her respectable parasol with the lace flounces round it?"

"Everybody has a parasol," Claude said; how idly he knew, for the persons whom he had pointed out were really at a by no means unrecognisable distance.

"But this is Elsie's," said Minnie, "that she asked me to fetch out of her room for her just after luncheon. She said her other one was too shabby, if she went with Mr. Purdon. I think they are going to the house of the Colthursts, and that's the way to it. Look—he has a tennis-racquet."

"Oh yes, I see. You needn't talk all the rest of the day," Claude said roughly.

He watched the two figures out of sight over a stile, and then, turning away, muttered something about a cripple, and flung himself down on the grass, with imprudent violence, perhaps, for he gave a queer sort of groan, as if he were hurt.

The little girl stood by casting concerned glances at him with a dismayed and perplexed countenance. It was quite clear to her that Mr. Claude had been vexed by what she said, and this distressed her so much that she had no leisure to feel affronted at his unreasonable rudeness, when she had only answered his questions as best she could. Anxiously and deeply she pondered possible consolations, and at last ventured to say, coming a step nearer :

"Would you like some strawberries, Mr. Claude ? There are such big big ones in my own corner."

Claude half sat up, and glanced at her with a strange, dazed expression.

"Strawberries ? Why yes, I'd like some of all things," he said. "Do run and pick them, there's a good child."

Minnie was overjoyed, and flushed poppy-pink with happiness.

"Indeed I will," she said. "I'll pick every single one I can find that hasn't the hole of a slug in it ; and I'll put some powdery sugar on the plate." She darted off, but after a few steps turned back to ask : "Shall I bring you your glasses too ?"

"No, no, never mind about them," said Claude. "Run off, and don't come up here again, for I'm busy. Leave the strawberries in my room, or anywhere."

So Minnie started off once more, with her spirits somewhat dashed, because Mr. Claude's irritable and dejected tone roused vague suspicions that he did not really care about the strawberries, and his injunction had swept away the anticipated pleasure of carrying them up to him. However, she forgot doubt and disappointment in the business of filling a capacious cabbage leaf with the fruit.

This task still occupied her among the low, green plants under the south wall in the kitchen-garden, and she was, in fact, just carefully scrutinising a large, pyramidal-shaped, pinkish-white berry, lest it should show traces of a slug's repast, when the dreadful things began to happen which stamped that summer afternoon ineffaceably on her memory.

First of all some one rushed, shouting wildly, through the adjoining yard and into the house, whence, immediately, rose up shrieks and exclamations, and a confused noise of running to and fro. Next Lizzie Moran, the under-housemaid, speeding by in quest of Larry Grier, the garden-boy, presently paused to tell Minnie that Jim McDougall "was after findin' the young master lyin' kilt dead at the foot of the ould quarry-cliffs up above yonder, on the hill. Larry must run for the doctor."

The news at first conveyed no clear idea to Minnie's mind except that it would be useless to pick any more strawberries as long as Mr. Claude was lying killed dead, a state of things which could not conceivably continue. She laid her cabbage-leaf on the top of a tall, inverted flower-pot, and stood regretfully contemplating it.

Not until some time later, having been called indoors, she watched from an upstairs window five or six men carrying across the lawn a heavy, muffled burden, at sight of which the maids, who were also looking out, broke into sobs and prayers, did Minnie begin to realise that she would never again see her friend Mr. Claude come limping over the grass, as she had so often done in his four months at Drumkyle. How, in these circumstances, life was to go on at all seemed to her a dark and mysterious problem. She would have heard without surprise that it was to be solved by the ending of the world.

On the gloomy morrow's morning little Minnie found herself quite a person of importance, because it was she who had last seen poor Mr. Claude alive.

She was considered too young, it is true, to give evidence at the inquest; but her reminiscences of that interview up on the hill past the fir-grove were the subject of much questioning, principally on Lady's Olive's part, for, the conversation having taken place on the very threshold of the fearful door through which he had vanished away

utterly beyond her reach, Claude's mother felt that whole worlds hung on each word of the little girl's report, now never to be revised, confirmed, or contradicted.

Her passionate desire taught Lady Olive to practise patience and self-restraint, so that she was most careful not to alarm little Minnie by any betrayal of despondent grief, contriving to put her questions in a matter-of-course, almost cheerful manner.

Only on one point her self-control did fall short : she could not entirely conceal the wishes she had about the purport of certain answers ; and these wishes were not to be fulfilled.

It was again Minnie's lot to state unwelcome truths ; but this time she did so in complete unconsciousness of their effect upon her hearer. Sorrow and dismay at what had befallen Claude bewildered her mind, and made her cling desperately to the remembrance of him exactly as he had been when he was still among them—his real self ; not the awful thing—worse than nobody—which they had carried back instead of him.

Even if she had perceived the nature of Lady Olive's wishes, she neither could nor would have modified the story, in which she persisted with a very convincing sincerity.

Yes, indeed, Mr. Claude had been vexed when she told him that the people were Elsie and Mr. Purdon—badly vexed, and he said a whisper to himself about a cripple, and a girl being tied



to something—she couldn't hear it all—and then he lay down on the grass with a sort of creak, and didn't look at anything for ever so long.

No, no, he wasn't in fun; he was quite cr——, quite unmerry, not a bit like what he was before luncheon. And she was sure that he had not a headache; he didn't look headachy-unhappy. When she asked him, he said that he would like some strawberries, but she thought he didn't really want them, for he told her to leave them anywhere, and not to come back with them, because he was busy. And when she looked round last he was lying in the same place, but she couldn't see his face, because it was covered up on his arm.

Here Minnie began to cry bitterly, and said that she would not have told Mr. Claude anything about Elsie and Mr. Purdon and Elsie's parasol only that he asked her, and she never thought he would mind, and she wondered why he did. Perhaps he wanted to play lawn-tennis too, and now he would never be able to do anything that he liked again. But indeed she hadn't meant to vex him.

The interview certainly brought no comfort either to questioner or questioned. Later in the day Mrs. Cramer made up a bow of black lutestring ribbon, and little Minnie did derive some slight consolation from the pinning of it on to the front of her white frock, where it looked like a huge, sooty-winged moth, and seemed, by externalising, to lessen the burden of her grief. But then her

load of remorse was nothing weightier at worst than a mere unintentional error of judgment.

Very different was the plight of Lady Olive, who dared not put her self-accusation even into definite thoughts.

On the contrary, she tried to deny and disprove the facts upon which it was grounded. The immediate consequences of her intervention to hinder Claude and Elsie's meeting were, no doubt, indisputable; yet her motives—a wish that Claude should not over-tire himself, and that Elsie should not miss a party—had been so praiseworthy as to place her among the number of those “who, having meant the best, have met the worst” by the merest misadventure.

It was terribly true that if Claude had not been left to his own devices he would never have gone rambling aimlessly and recklessly along the brink of the old quarry-pit, and have missed his uncertain footing to his destruction.

That, of course, was how the accident had happened; so the jury at the inquest pronounced, and so everybody else unofficially said. Only, remembering how, since his illness, Claude had occasionally betrayed sudden moods of despondency, brought on by some trivial cause, Lady Olive was visited by surmises suggesting a different explanation.

Her eager questioning of Minnie had been an attempt to banish fearful misgivings, and it had failed. The child's persistent: “He *was* vexed,

he was very badly vexed. I wish I hadn't told him, but I think he saw them himself. Oh, my Ladyship, why did he mind?" reinforced that dread.

So did the silence of Elsie Hall. It would have seemed quite natural for her to say: "If I had been there"; but she refrained, as though from a bitter reproach, Lady Olive thought, forgetting other reasons. Remorse, which had to be concealed, was perhaps in some measure masked under the semblance of the grief obviously appropriate to Claude's mother, not that this could easily be over-emphasised.

Ruthlessly complete was the disaster which she had drawn down upon herself. With her son had been swept away, not alone her great object in living, but all the minor details, such as wealth, home, and social consequence.

From the scene of her undoing she fled at the first moment possible, despite the protests of Claude's stranger heir, and established herself in a suburban villa near Dublin, there to begin a dismal little parody of her former life, with a pug and a fernery for the chief solace of her insipid hours. When she turned from the irksome present it was to confront a dead-wall future, or to gaze where the past lured her down a long vista of regrets.

Sheer melancholy weighed upon her, unrelieved save by a streak of resentment, which had a twofold object, being directed against little Minnie Ree,

the teller of painful truths, and Elsie Hall, whose happiness Lady Olive, in her own belief, had deliberately set herself to wreck. As time went on this feeling tended to increase rather than diminish.

## CHAPTER VI

### CONSEQUENCES

THIS melancholy event at Glenoona had, of course, results which made themselves felt in other places. The possessions which had slipped out of poor Claude Nugent's grasp were too considerable to be transferred without far-reaching consequences, especially as the new landlord whom they instituted at Drumkyle Park was a stranger from a different county, and likely, people said, to sell or let the property.

Tenants and labourers discussed that probability with anxious minds. Nor were they the only persons concerned. Mrs. Cramer, for instance, wondered how soon Mr. Christopher Considine would wish her to leave, and what was to become of little Miss Minnie, as there seemed to be small chance of meeting with such another convenient situation.

"You'd liefer not be parted from her, ma'am," a neighbour remarked sympathetically.

"Liefer I wouldn't," Elizabeth assented, "if parting you may call it, so long as there does be

the waft of the wind and the shine of the sun left between us."

"Cold comfort there is in the wind, or the sun either, for the matter of that," said her neighbour, "to make any great differ."

"All the differ in the world it makes, me dear," said Elizabeth, "as her poor ladyship is apt to know this day, I'm thinking."

And the neighbour, to give their conversation a livelier turn, began an account of how Peter Connell and Barney Lauder had been in hand-grips at Dan Moriarty's last night, only for some of the other lads separating and pacifying them.

A like doubt as to the destination of Minnie weighed heavily also on the mind of Nicholas Garvin; but in his case it was further perplexed by several other anxieties. He knew, as Mrs. Cramer did not, that Mr. Considine was proposing to spend a few weeks at Drumkyle, and his proximity to Miss Minette, if she had not yet departed, would involve, Nicholas thought, the possibility of dangerous revelations.

His anxieties were increased by the fact that the company in which his late master had invested his savings for him now unexpectedly refrained from paying any dividend, and offered to its disappointed shareholders no particular prospect of ever resuming the practice, a very serious matter in view of his responsibility for the suitable maintenance of Miss Dormer.

In these circumstances it was certainly unfor-



fortunate that he should have seen fit to quarrel vehemently with Mr. Considine's housekeeper about the proper method of making damson cheese, and should have gone off in a huff, at a day's notice, regardless of the forfeited wages, which he could so ill afford to lose.

After a short period of anxious reflection in temporary lodgings over Mick Early, the blacksmith's, he resolved to consult Anastasia MacElvery, or, as he put it, to let her know the way things were.

In response to this communication, which took place on a tiny grass-plot, where she had just spread out some fine things to bleach, Anastasia frankly expressed her belief that he was the very foolish man; and she went on to give him an alarming piece of news. Master Michael, she said, was moping so the last few days that Mr. Considine had made up his mind to take him along whenever he himself went to Glenoona, which would be very presently.

"You couldn't blame the child for not having more sense," she added pointedly. "But what he may be apt to see at Drunkyle Park is beyond me to say."

Nicholas was too much taken aback for any prompt suggestion or even a retort.

"It might be as unhandy as most things," he said, "if the two of them come across one another."

Both were meditatively silent for a while, her

visitor's failure to take offence having disarmed Anastasia of further sarcasms. At last :

"I could be writing word to me cousin Elizabeth," she said, "that she had a right to keep the young lady out of the little gentleman's way while he was in it, for fear she would be putting him in mind, I might say, of the sister he was after losing. There'd be some truth in that, at all events, if it wasn't the whole itself."

"Sure plenty," said Nicholas, "there's no call for anybody to be swallyin' it whole, if that was all, Signorina."

"It's not choking people that way you'll be, Mr. Garvin," remarked Anastasia.

Nicholas ignored the innuendo, and reverted to a reproach implied in her comment on his quarrel with the cook.

"Was it putting up you'd have me be with impidence from an old *ónshach* of a woman that hadn't ever as much wit as would baste a couple of snipe, let alone after she run to fat, till she's hard set to waddle across the kitchen? Little I'd have to do to be lettin' the likes of her take upon herself to tell me that the only thing I'd e'er a notion about was haythin Chineee curries."

"Less to do you had when you let her set you flouncing out of a good place, as if you'd find another one round the turn of the road ready to hand whenever you wanted it," said Anastasia. "Howsome'er, I'll write to me cousin."

Another person whose fortunes were to be in

some degree affected by Sir Claude Nugent's death was Mrs. Hume Willester's stepmother-in-law.

At the time of it she was living near Dublin, whither she had come, partly to seek medical advice for her invalid husband, and partly to escape from the dulness of her country quarters. Among her rather numerous grievances she accounted most important the comparative failure of her second marriage, which she had contracted with what persons disposed to criticise could term unbecomingly promptness after she was widowed by the demise of Walter Arfeld of Glenoona.

That in taking this step she was influenced by impatience of her narrowed circumstances, with two serious-minded daughters for companions, argues her a person of slender internal resources, and rightly so: her active mind needed visible and tangible matters to work on.

But she had been mainly allured by the belief that she was forming a very affluent connection, as elderly Mr. Willester's only child had not long since married the daughter of a reputed millionaire. Whereupon, with startling rapidity, had followed a series of unforeseen disasters and disillusion.

Within a few months of her wedding-day had come the death of her step-son, the bankruptcy of his father-in-law, and the breakdown of her husband's health, so that she found herself, with forfeited jointure, the wife of a hopeless invalid, whose means were not more than moderate, and who was becoming perilously attached to a penniless

little grandchild. Any day might witness the drawing up of a will in favour of Eileen.

At this point, however, things grew more propitious to Mrs. Willester senior. She was possessed of more daring and ingenuity than common-sense, and the former qualities not seldom assisted her to extricate herself from the consequences entailed by the latter's shortcomings. They now enabled her to grasp a happy chance of removing the most obstructive stumbling-block from her path, in the shape of poor Hume's young widow and infant daughter.

Her husband and she were staying at a hydro-pathic establishment within easy reach of Rathkennan when she heard vague talk about Mrs. Gannon's new charitable foundation, and was struck by the idea that it might possibly be turned to account. The extremely unbusiness-like tone of letters received in answer to her enquiries emboldened her to call in person on this Mr. Verold, who wrote as one having authority, and yet with a very encouraging betrayal of either ignorance or indifference about the matter in hand.

It was with just a wish to appear in a pathetic guise, rather than with any definitely fraudulent design, that she resumed her widow's weeds on the occasion of the interview, though she did not scruple to avail herself of her flustered host's error, when he obviously mistook her for the candidate pensioner in person.

To throw away such convenient means of avoiding

awkward questions about the age of her egregiously youthful daughter-in-law would have seemed positively impious, for Mrs. Willester did not regard the transaction at all from Christy Considine's point of view, which led him, as we have seen, to speak of her as "that hag." She thought it quite a providential asylum for the widow and orphan, who had so disappointingly become a costly burden instead of the valuable connections which they had promised to prove.

Thankworthy, again, was the trifling illness which opportunely made it easy to work upon Mrs. Hume's fears, and speed her flight from a threat of danger to little Eileen's health. Of course her grandfather's unreasonable moping and fretting after the departure of the child was tiresome enough; but his wife salved her conscience by reading aloud to him every day a leading article out of the newspaper. That he could not hear, and would not have heeded it, was a detail which did not diminish her complacent consciousness of well-doing.

Still, when that riddance had been safely accomplished, and Mrs. Willester had no further need to scheme for the reversion of all her husband's property, she found another cause of unrest in the extreme dulness of her home at Garnagort, whence she presently conveyed the old man, wearied and bewildered, to the livelier regions of Dublin.

There, among other pursuits, she began to have dealings with a stockbroker, whom she had consulted about some most alluring prospectuses,

which stirred in her visions of a speedily-heaped-up fortune. He frankly admitted that those shares might be very desirable acquisitions, but advised her to avoid all risks by letting her business pass through his experienced hands, which she prudently agreed to do.

Thenceforward much of her time was occupied by calling upon him, or sending him letters with instructions and suggestions. Her communications were often accompanied by one of the small cheques which she was now empowered to sign on her husband's behalf. Mr. Pole assured her that he had never known a lady who had an acuter eye for the money-market, and she looked forward with eager confidence to the time when the results of her judicious investments would begin to accrue in the shape of splendid dividends.

Then, before this had come to pass, misfortune brought her acquaintance and connection by marriage, Lady Olive Nugent, into her neighbourhood, and though, in the circumstances, intercourse with poor Lady Olive was not likely to be enlivening, they were socially constrained to see something of one another.

At first the necessity seemed to Lady Olive just one of the minor disagreeables which abounded now in her doleful lot. What little she had seen of Mrs. Arfeld she had never liked, and she was not disposed to take a more favourable view of Mrs. Willester, who constantly said and did things that set her teeth on edge.



For instance, at their first meeting in Dublin she talked much about her servant-girls, and volunteered the information that she always used mourning stationery, because she believed that they stole it less than plain.

"They think it unlucky, I fancy," she said, "and I really think it keeps them off it, so I always use a narrow edge myself. With such very extensive family connections as we have one *ought* almost always to be in mourning for somebody. I find that one can't leave so much as a plain envelope about without its being snapped up. But naturally you're not troubled in that way at present. . . . Oh, talking of that, poor Mr. Willester is at a great loss for his own particular man-servant, whom we unluckily left behind—quite a general factotum, you know."

To these domestic details Lady Olive listened at first with depressed repugnance. As time went on, however, she began not only to endure her visitor's talk with more resignation, but actually to take some languid interest in it.

Mrs. Willester, who was her senior by several years, knew the ins and outs of sundry Arfeld family affairs, about which Lady Olive, on her sister's account, felt a little curiosity. This Mrs. Willester was quite ready to satisfy: gossip, indeed, being a pleasure, and gossip with an earl's daughter a privilege. The glory of having become mother-in-law to a Lady Dorothy had never palled upon her.

At the outset she found a passive hearer in Lady Olive, who, listlessly resuming the business of life in a devastated world, lacked energy to bear a part more active than was unavoidable. But as every now and then a comment seemed to be called for, she would occasionally add to it some fact from her own knowledge, and gradually fell into the habit of imparting as well as receiving information.

Thus it came to pass by and by that each lady mentioned circumstances which gave the other a slight shock of rather unpleasant surprise.

It distinctly annoyed Mrs. Willester to learn that the Nugents had a cousin at Rathkennan, in the neighbourhood of those almshouses, where she had so adroitly established her interloping rivals.

The hard fact that her husband's daughter-in-law was living on charity could not, she felt, well accord with her own ambition to pose as a person of affluence. Crude purse-pride was not the cause of this ambition, but rather her consciousness that her second marriage had been a mercenary one, which made an admission of poverty seem tantamount to an admission of failure; and Mrs. Willester did not like to own the defeat of her plans.

Furthermore, certain communications received from Mr. Considine showed clearly that he took no favourable view of her proceedings, and was not disposed to conceal it.

In these circumstances she saw with relief that Lady Olive and he had hitherto been all but strangers, and that Lady Olive's sentiments towards him were not by any means amicable. They had changed, indeed, since her son's death, from the indifference with which she had regarded an improbable heir-presumptive to a positive animosity against Claude's actual successor.

She had refused to see him at the time of the funeral, and was now quite prepared to put the worst construction upon anything she heard about his doings or lettings alone. Though Mrs. Willester would gladly have fostered this aversion, as lessening the likelihood of awkward disclosures, she was hampered by her extremely limited knowledge about Mr. Considine or his affairs, and it was more by good luck than good guidance that she happened upon a piece of information which had the desired effect.

Lady Olive was both amazed and indignant at the news that the presence of little Minnie Ree at Drumkyle Park had been brought about by Mr. Considine. Of this Mrs. Willester most confidently assured her. The fact was indisputable. Had not the negotiations for the child's establishment there been carried on by Anastasia MacElvery, Mrs. Willester's own ex-maid, and Elizabeth Cramer's cousin, who was ostensibly acting in behalf of Nicholas Garvin, a man in Mr. Considine's service?

"And, my dear Lady Olive, you may suppose

how probable it is that a refined-looking little girl like her really belongs to such a person. I saw her last summer one day when I was paying Elizabeth a visit. I believe, indeed, there was some story about her being left an orphan by foreign friends of this Garvin ; but I know I always thought that it sounded in the highest degree unlikely. And besides that, why should *he* have picked out Drumkyle as a home for her ? ”

For the moment Mrs. Willester had forgotten that at the time she mentioned Christy Considine's chance of ever becoming master of Drumkyle must have seemed a very remote one.

Lady Olive also was ignorant enough about dates to accept the suggestion, and did it with a thrill of wrath. Evidently the odious man had made up his mind that her poor Claude would not recover ; but he might at least have had the decency to wait until his wishes had been fulfilled before foisting this child into a place that did not belong to him.

Of course there was some mystery about her, discreditable, no doubt, to all parties concerned. On the latter point she entirely agreed with Mrs. Willester, adding, and believing, that she had always thought Minnie a sly-looking little thing, quite capable of inventing stories if they served her purpose.

About Mr. Considine's unseemly forecasting of his inheritance she felt so bitterly that she did not care to discuss it with an acquaintance so super-

ficial as she intended Mrs. Willester to be, but her unuttered resentment was all the deeper and more durable.

Her mind was full of it when, shortly after this conversation, she had a visit from Mr. Considine himself.

Brought to Dublin by business, he called upon Lady Olive, of whose hostility towards him he was more unconscious than a less amiable person might have been. That the sight of poor young Nugent's successor would not be over-welcome to her he could easily understand; still, the apprehension did not deter him from an attempt to impress upon her as persuasively as possible the expediency of occupying the vacant Drumkyle whenever she so pleased.

His own antipathy to town made him feel strongly about the hardships of a suburban residence, and he was confirmed in this view as his tram-car slid along, past staring red-brick terraces and fantastic villas, whose meagre garden-plots were dreary with early spring annuals struggling through a blight of motor-dust.

The obvious sincerity wherewith he urged his wishes convinced Lady Olive, for the time being, of his kindly intentions, and so far mollified her that, although she was fully resolved against accepting his offer, she softened her refusal by graciously consulting him on the subject of her present small demesne. She told him that her uppermost difficulty just then was her unsuccessful quest for a

general man, who would be useful both indoors and out, no hopeful candidate having so far appeared.

On hearing this Christy said :

"Well now, I've quite lately lost a man who would have been the very thing you want, if it wasn't that his manifold accomplishments seem to include a gift for constantly falling out with all his colleagues, a propensity which you might find troublesome in your household."

"In such a small one," Lady Olive suggested, with some eagerness, "perhaps he would find it easier to keep the peace."

"I much doubt it," said Christy. "He's prone, you see, both to giving and taking offence. It's a pity, for otherwise he would be invaluable. In fact, if he hadn't been so obviously the aggressor on this last occasion, I would gladly have let his antagonist the cook depart instead. She would be far more easily replaced. But I really should hardly like to recommend a belligerent to you."

"Oh, I think I'll give him a trial," Lady Olive said, moved partly by a forlorn kind of wish to assert herself, as she recognised with a pang the fact that she had once more become an unprotected female, to be commiserated for her manless establishment. "I'll chance hostilities," she said, with a touch of defiance. "*My* cook wouldn't be an irreparable loss either."

And so it was arranged.

Very soon after Mr. Considine's call Mrs. Wil-



lester put in another appearance at Elder Bank, being anxious to ascertain whether she had suffered any detriment from his communications. At the time of his arrival she had been with Lady Olive, whom she had rather amazed by the precipitation of her flight upon seeing him descend from the tram-car.

Nothing, apparently, had been revealed about her affairs, which was so far satisfactory; but at the news of Nicholas Garvin's engagement she pricked up her ears, none too well-pleased. The event seemed to her untoward, because his acquaintance with Anastasia MacElvery might easily lead to undesirable disclosures respecting that little household occupying Gentian Chalet at The Independency. Mrs. Hume had left the choice of a name for her cottage entirely to Georgia Verold.

Against this drawback to Nicholas Garvin's advent Mrs. Willester could set the chance of being able to extract from him some particulars about Minnie Ree, the mysterious child, a baffling subject upon which she had speculated much; for in her mind curiosity flourished like a weed of robust habit on a patch of untilled land.

Just then, it is true, the crop was less exuberant than usual, being suppressed by her absorption in speculations of another kind. Her business with Mr. Pole, the stockbroker, was at this time in full swing, and expanding with all the rapidity she could contrive, though with less than satisfied her eagerness. Many a wakeful night-hour was

spent in planning how she might raise the capital that would enable her to seize some golden opportunity.

But others went more agreeably in forecasts of the riches which might be expected speedily to accrue from her judicious investments. According to her estimates, her income would presently be rising by leaps and bounds in a kind of geometrical progression, which would set her above all sordid cares. Ere long she would find that she could well afford the removal of her step-daughter-in-law and grandchild from their dependent position. She would *not* bring them home again, however; for though her poor husband might seem past will-making, most of those valuable shares stood, perforce, in his name, and it was better to be sure than sorry.

## CHAPTER VII

### FINANCE

HIS acceptance of a situation with Lady Olive Nugent was for Nicholas Garvin what he would have called, if it had happened to another person, "a fine take-down," for his opinion of women in general was humble, and the stooping to put himself under the orders of one irked him not a little.

But concern about the dignity of Miss Dormer constrained him in some measure to disregard his own. Failure to maintain her in a style fairly befitting her original social position would touch him on a most sensitive point of honour, and this failure now confronted him.

His resources were seriously dwindled, and Mrs. Cramer had written word that the young lady was growing out of all her bits of skirts: they did be running up to her knees every day she put them on. Miss Dormer thus skimpily clad was a picture he could not contemplate with any equanimity, even philosophically considered as an incident in his strange world, and he therefore informed Lady Olive that he proposed to enter her service.

He slightly blunted the edge of his mortification by expressing himself in high-flown terms, which left her half doubtful as to what he meant, when he said that he stood under the necessity of entertaining matters from a more favourable view than other circumstances would have placed equally in conformity with his inclinations.

To Anastasia MacElvery, however, he spoke without any fine phrases about his anxieties, on a farewell call at Gentian Chalet. Foremost among them was still the possibility of Master Michael's being brought to Drumkyle and recognising his sister.

Anastasia repeated her promise to warn Mrs. Cramer, but added :

"It's a good trifle over a year since they seen one another ; and they growing all the while, mightn't they be apt to scarce keep any great recollection again now ? "

"Is it recollection"—Nicholas scouted the suggestion rather indignantly—"whether, now, they'd have recollection enough to clap the rope round the two necks of us, Signorina, if so be it was a hanging matter."

With respect to the shrinking frocks she offered, more acceptably, to advise their lengthening by the addition of flounces.

"Me cousin Elizabeth's a grand needleworker," she said, "and would contrive something in next to no time, if she thought it wasn't taking a liberty."

This seemed to Nicholas a very proper attitude.

The difficulty was one in which Anastasia could readily sympathise with him, because she had herself just then been experiencing a trouble of the same kind. Only the day before a lamentable accident had happened at the Chalet.

In preparation for the coming season she had been looking over Miss Eileen's summer wardrobe, making up fine little muslin frocks, putting stitches here and there in delicate silken ones, crimping ruffles, and ironing sashes, after which she collected them all in a large wicker dress-basket. This was set in a corner of the small kitchen, to wait until Biddy Gallaher, the washer-woman, should come and lend a hand in carrying it upstairs.

A summons from her mistress meanwhile took Anastasia out of the room, and during her absence : "What should a divil of a big red-hot cinder out of the grate go do, but let a lep, like a cricket bewitched, and land itself right in the middle of the basket !"

There it burned its way down through many folds of highly inflammable material until at length the whole took fire, and Anastasia returned to find that a fierce conflagration had left nothing except a layer of flaky ashes, with the black cinder lurking among them to explain the disaster.

What made it the more vexatious was that Miss Verold had just succeeded in persuading Mrs. Hume to come and stay for a while at Linmacran,

their new and nearer residence, where Eileen would have more spacious playgrounds. But how could the invitation be accepted now, when Eileen was left with hardly any pretty things to wear?

Her daughter's attire was almost the only subject about which Mrs. Hume showed a careful fastidiousness, and it seemed as if to satisfy her would be a matter of difficulty. The new and expensive outfit just destroyed had for the time being quite exhausted their slender resources.

"And for this long while back sorrow a penny is there coming to us from the poor old gentleman. That little ould weasel-woman has got a firm holt of himself and whatever he owns. Goodness may pity him!"

Anastasia spoke with bitterness, engendered by the blighting of a cherished plan, for she had been counting much on this excursion beyond the precincts of The Half-Square.

She entertained hopes wild and vague that it might somehow bring about their permanent withdrawal from an abode which she always thought of as "no better than a bit of a bedizened workhouse," and residence in which she deeply resented on Mrs. Hume's account. So she added:

"And no thanks to her that the whole of us wasn't burnt up along with Miss Eileen's frocks."

"I wouldn't wonder," said Nicholas, "if you



could make a shift with some of your mistress's cast-off clothes—dresses and overmantles, and such. Ladies do be throwing them away in stacks the first minute that one of the bandilaros or booligroobies, or other trimming-fixings attached to them, gets the name of going out of fashion. You might cut a dale of short lengths out of the yards they have streeling after them. And that's my advice to you."

"Is it now?" said Anastasia, who had no great love for taking advice. "And poor Mrs. Hume's things all as black as the crows with her widow's mourning. A rael gay appearance they'd have on the imp of a child."

Nevertheless she had already bethought her of some trunks the contents of which were of a remoter date than to have been tinged with woe by the untimely demise of poor young Mr. Willester, and these she hoped to utilise for Miss Eileen's benefit.

When she was looking through them shortly afterwards she came upon something in a flat-bottomed, curved-topped, dark-green leather case, the sight of which suggested to her other possible ways and means.

On the following day she mentioned the subject to Mrs. Hume, who agreed with her that it would be very convenient to have a little ready money, and that what you kept shut up in a box from one year's end to the other was no use to man or mortal, unless for drawing thieves. It would be such ages

before Eileen could wear anything of the kind that to consider this seemed quite absurd—a pretty hat and cape and some new toys and picture-books were much more to the purpose.

In consequence it came to pass that Nicholas Garvin, wearing through tedious early days among his suburban villa surroundings, received by post a registered packet, together with an explanatory letter from Anastasia MacElvery.

“Dear Mr. Garvin,” she wrote, “just a line to let you know about the ornament. Poor Mrs. Hume owns it, and has no use for it now, good or bad, so she would be glad if you would get them to take it off you at some of the shops up in Dublin where they keep jewellery. The beads and stones is real, so you might be able to raise as much as a couple of pounds on it, but we leave it to you, that has a better notion about the like, after all your doings and dealings out there in China.”

“That comes,” said Nicholas, “of me gassing to her about the time we got a bit of loot at Fu-ah-Long, and an old gentleman gave me the price of a bullock for a couple of queer-pattoned brooches. But sure, divil a much I know about any such concerns.”

“We would be content enough with the best you can do for us, anyway,” the letter went on; “only mind you don’t say a word about it to anybody, for I believe old Mrs. Willester herself is

up in those parts now, and very apt to pass remarks if she heard tell of you selling anything out of this, and as like as not she might try to grab it, that belongs to her no more than it does to e'er an old thief of a magpie might by chance cock an eye on it. Plenty she got off us without that, so just keep your tongue between your teeth. One of them blue orders out of the post office is the handiest way of sending the money when you have it sold. Mr. Considine is back again, and I hear no more talk of him going to Glenoona, but if I do any time I would send you word. Miss Eileen was asking for you to-day. Excuse bad writing." (This is manners: Anastasia's script might have served for headlines in a copy-book.)—"From your true friend, A. MacElvery."

The commission was partially pleasing to Nicholas, in accordance with his theory that a sight of groceries had got joggled together in the strange world we were wandering through: 'twould be one while before we had the pepper rightly sorted out of the sugar. It gratified his sense of self-importance, but perplexed him with doubts about his power of executing it satisfactorily.

When the letter arrived he was pricking out seedling pansies for a border round a bed in front of the house, a process the main result of which seemed to be backache, and he diversified the remainder of his tedious task by pondering what he should do so earnestly that he inadvertently replanted

a number of limp little weeds, which he had just laboriously pulled up.

His right course needed some careful thinking over. A general sense of capability was gainsaid by misgivings as to any special qualification for "pricing" jewels, the lack of which might, when it came to bargaining, place him at the mercy of any more knowledgeable person.

"Supposing now," he reflected, "the thing was worth ten or twelve pound, and I let it go for the couple Anastasia MacElvery has the talk of, or less, I might as well take and throw away the balance in place of putting it in the poor young lady's pocket. But then it's to be considered that the two of them there are deeper in ignorance—a dale—than I am meself, and no sign of anybody else belongin' to either of them likely to make e'er a better job of it.

"Morebetoken, if the old woman, as Anastasia says, does be on the prowl, it's a different description of understanding they might have a call for in the matter. Was it herself, I wonder, come yesterday afternoon, with a sharp point on her cocked-up nose, lookin' twenty ways out of the corners of her eyes? I didn't get to hear her name. On all chances I'm thinking I had a right to do what I can with it. Her ladyship would give me the address of a dacint shop, where I could show them a sight of it without letting on there was any notion of sellin'."

On being asked to recommend an establishment

where Nicholas Garvin could get some repairs done to a bit of a keepsake he had, Lady Olive suggested first the fashionable Gray & Eberle, whose show-windows glitter spaciouly in Grafton Street, and then she added :

"But they are very dear people ; no doubt you could have what you want done just as well at some cheaper place."

He replied, however :

"I'm much obligated, melady. Sure they couldn't charge anything out-of-the-way for just straightening a crookened pin, and I'll be apt to give them a trial."

At Gray & Eberle's a few afternoons later Nicholas fell in with no less than the foreman himself who, upon perceiving one of the working-class in his best clothes, affably asked him his business, strongly suspecting it to be the purchase of a wedding-ring, and proposing, if so, a transfer of the customer to a junior assistant, whose naturally jocular view of the transaction might enliven it with appropriate jests, beneath a senior's dignity ; but when Nicholas responded by unwrappng his registered packet the experienced foreman's eye at once recognised, in merely the aspect of the leathern case, a probability that its contents would be important enough to call for his own personal attention.

The disclosure of the pearl necklet, with its pendant of clear-set brilliants and emeralds, more than justified his forecast, and nearly surprised

him into expressing admiration less than discreetly guarded. He refrained, however, and without comment helped Nicholas to lift the foam-white beads from their channelled purple velvet bed.

"I'm thinkin' something's a trifle askew with the clasp of it," Nicholas began guilefully explaining. "There's this little gold tongue like had ought to fit itself into the hole here forenint it, but some way it doesn't rightly."

"Has got slightly bent, no doubt," said the foreman, examining the stones.

"Apt to be slipping out, it seems, whatever ails it," said Nicholas, "so that the whole concern might very aisily drop off anybody wearing it, and go to loss."

"Oh certainly, indeed," said the foreman. "Of course the fastening should be made thoroughly secure."

"I don't wear it meself only of a very odd while ; some other jools suits me complexion better," said Nicholas. "Shut up there it is, gettin' no use at all."

"Ah, quite so ; and it's a mistake to keep pearls lying by," the foreman said, eyeing the emeralds with a thought of some stones which his firm had long been anxious to match. "They get discoloured, and deteriorate in value."

"There's not much sign of discolorations on *them*, anyhow," said Nicholas. "You'd be bothered pickin' them up off of clane snow. And as for



the big diamonds and emeralds, in a good light they're lepping out of their shapes in flashes of fire."

"It's a pretty-looking thing," said the foreman, "but of course very old-fashioned."

"Aye, bedad," Nicholas assented, "the like of it's not to be had in these times; you may take your oath of that."

This depreciation and defence of property was preliminary to an arrangement by which Nicholas agreed to leave the necklet, ostensibly for repairs, on the understanding that Messrs. Gray & Eberle, if after further examination they cared to do so, should put a price upon it, in case Mr. Garvin wished to dispose of it.

But Mr. Garvin's departure was followed, for King the foreman, by a period of doubt and hesitation. That he could secure the ornament on very easy terms seemed quite certain, and that to have done so would be a valuable feather in his cap on the return of his absent principals he clearly saw.

The troublesome point was that he saw no less clearly the strangeness of such jewellery being owned by an individual whom he had identified as Lady Olive Nugent's general man. Awkward complications obviously might ensue, were careful enquiries into its antecedents by any means omitted; and apart from the dread of legal consequences, King was not without some conscientious scruples, which generally forbade him to grasp the skirts

of happy chance with a pickpocket's daring hand.

After much consideration he now judged it his best course to inform Lady Olive confidentially that a valuable piece of jewellery, which he minutely described, had been offered for sale by a person in her employment : Would her ladyship wish to inspect the article ?

Upon reading this guarded communication her ladyship knew that the article was none of her property ; but she at once connected it with Nicholas Garvin, and through him with his late employer, Mr. Considine. Not that she assumed Nicholas to have misappropriated it, for if such were the case he would hardly have had the foolish effrontery to consult her about a jeweller.

It seemed far more probable that the attempted sale of the necklet was a commission entrusted by Mr. Considine to Nicholas, whose post had evidently been a confidential one, witness the mystery of little Minnie Ree, and whose varied accomplishments might, of course, include a capacity for travelling in trinkets. From Nicholas Garvin to Anastasia MacElvery, the actual arranger of the child's reception at Drumkyle, was only a step, Anastasia being clearly hand-in-glove with him, and it occurred to Lady Olive that, as Anastasia's former mistress, Mrs. Willester might possibly know something about the necklet, or find the subject interesting.

By this sequence of reflections she was led to

call at the Willesters' lodgings, in order to propose that Mrs. Willester should join her in a visit to Gray & Eberle. But Mrs. Willester was not at home.

Mrs. Willester had, in fact, gone to Rathkennen, and by doing so had turned her back on what was really the object of her journey.

A momentous crisis had come in her financial affairs. Mr. Pole informed her that if she wished to seize an opportunity for making enormous profits, the production forthwith of a comparatively small remittance was quite indispensable. Fervent indeed were her wishes, but her resources appeared to be entirely exhausted. Every available security had been realised, so that they were already threatened with inconvenient pinching caused by a temporary loss of income, as the huge dividends on her newly-purchased stocks had not yet become payable.

In these circumstances an idea which had long hovered vaguely in her mind began to take a more definite shape. Ever since the collapse into bankruptcy of her stepson's father-in-law, with its overclouding of the young couple's prospects, she had surmised that from Mrs. Hume's fine jewels, which were for the most part surrendered to the creditors, some remnants had escaped this fate—surreptitiously, she believed, and therefore purposely refrained from making any investigations at the time. "Be to their faults a little blind," was an injunction which she obeyed with discreetly

averted eyes when any lapses on the part of her friends promised any communicable sort of profit.

Though nothing was discovered by an overhauling of drawers and boxes for which she found an opportunity on Mrs. Hume's consignment to The Independency, this failure did not convince her that every such quest would be fruitless, for she felt conscious of not having made the search with the thoroughness and zeal inspired by a particular object.

She now had, however, a very particular object indeed, in the urgent need of some ready money. Her chance of supplying it by a sudden domiciliary visit to her step-daughter-in-law appeared strong enough to warrant the expense of the long railway journey, while as for any other justification, she considered that the removal from poor Louie's keeping of some costly and useless white elephant of a necklace or tiara would be a positively meritorious deed.

Therefore she put on unusually shabby attire, befitting the company of a pensioner—a skimpy alpaca skirt, a cloth mantle so shiny that it suggested black-leading, and a bonnet with many-gapped bugle trimming and broken-backed plume; after which she took a third-class return-ticket to Rathkennan. It would be hardly possible to get back that day, but she herself, or some member of the little household, could sleep for the night on the sofa in their little sitting-room.

In the train she occupied herself with finishing touches to her plan of procedure. Its main feature was to be a searching examination of all Mrs. Hume's property, a pretext for which she had already manufactured in the shape of a missing legal document of much importance.

But though to make success possible it seemed absolutely essential that Anastasia MacElvery should be got out of the way, Mrs. Willester was still unprovided with any scheme for accomplishing this, until the April-green grass-fields through which she sped suggested to her a serviceable idea. They were flecked with misty yellow, at sight of which she said to herself that she would ask Anastasia to gather her some cowslips.

She had no doubt that Anastasia's good nature would be very easily enlisted in behalf of the Dublin slum-children, with their pathetic delight in rare wild-flowers; and then, while she was out picking ample bunches, indoors the investigation could go on unhampered by the presence of any spectator more observant than poor half-awake Louie, and free from the danger that the very object sought might disappear, so to speak, unseen, deftly whisked away into some not discoverable hiding-place.

Trudging along from the station to The Independency, through the early-afternoon sunshine, Mrs. Willester thought over, with no small complacency, the details of this simple plan; but she reached the end of her short walk only to find that her

ingenuity had been thrown away : Gentian Chalet was shut up, and all its inmates had gone to stay with Miss Verold up at Linmacran.

This was a most unlooked-for disappointment. That Louie, whose enterprise hardly enabled her to face a morning call without counsel and encouragement, should take upon herself to go off on a visit would have seemed strange in any circumstances ; and Mrs. Willester had always thought of her as securely cloistered in her charitable institution. Quite a new light, and, even apart from the present inconvenience, a disagreeable one, was thrown on the situation by the discovery that such outings were permitted.

Mrs. Willester lingered disconcertedly at the porch of Gentian Chalet, before which her informant, Joe McSweeney, the gardener, was raking. If indeed she could by any means have got into the deserted house the opportunity might have proved a golden one, but Joe declared it out of his power to admit her, and was in no case disposed to stretch a point for her behoof, being unfavourably impressed by the aspect of the shabby-genteel stranger. Her somewhat coarsely conceived hint of silver ostentatiously counted in her purse only made him resume his raking with more rasping energy.

Yet though her plans had so far fallen through, Mrs. Willester was not daunted into abandoning her design. Having learned that Linmacran was not much more than half a mile "along down the



road," she at once resolved upon making her way thither, and inducing Mrs. Hume to accompany her back to The Independency, or, better still, to provide her with the means of entering Gentian Chalet.

Accordingly, before many minutes had passed, her arrival caused a small wave of consternation in the garden, where Mr. and Miss Verold were entertaining their visitors. Allen, in fact, allowed himself to be swept away by it in craven flight, ejaculating almost audibly: "The talking widow, by all that's dreadful!" while Eileen stared at her wide-eyed, with a bewildered sense of half-forgotten dislike, and the two older ladies were obviously dismayed.

After this somewhat discouraging reception, however, Mrs. Willester's luck seemed to take a turn. For one thing, Georgie Verold had been led by her brother's alarming reports to imagine his voluble widow in lurid colours, with which the reality did not altogether correspond, and consequently now adopted a reactionary belief that perhaps the poor woman was not so horrible after all. This view, combined with the plausibility of the story about the legal document, prompted an offer on Georgie's part to drive the two Mrs. Willesters in her pony-trap, that the search at Gentian Chalet might take place without delay.

Then, by an unusual chance, Mrs. Hume knew where the requisite bunch of keys was to be found, which much facilitated matters, and, still more

fortunately, Anastasia MacElvery had gone with the kitchenmaid to look on at an otter-hunt, the yelling and yelping of whose members sounded across two or three fields. Mrs. Willester had a free hand. Therefore, with so many auspicious circumstances appearing to conspire in her favour, it was additionally mortifying that the results were a blank.

A thorough examination of every receptacle, including the big trunks out in the little shed, brought to light nothing of more account than a few insignificant trinkets, which for her purposes were neither here nor there. Failure, in fact, mocked at her enterprise, and it now only remained for her to shorten the expedition as much as she could.

Finding it possible just to catch a quick train, which would bring her home before midnight, she hurried off, glad to escape the annoyance of an encounter with Anastasia, who was sure to suspect why she had come. She could not get away without the ironical burden of a large primrose bunch, that Mrs. Hume had, during the search, gathered for her poor old father-in-law, as the only thing she could do to express her good-will and commiseration.

However, the flowers were tossed out of a railway carriage window before they had travelled far from Rathkennan, the action giving vent to a very little of Mrs. Willester's disappointed chagrin. For the rest of the journey she had no employment

save unsuccessful endeavours to excogitate methods of raising money. Her arrival at home resembled in its effects the blowing in of a malignant east wind, from which her feeble husband was pitiably shelterless.

## CHAPTER VIII

### MR. HENRY'S AMBITION

AMONG the many grievous things which befell Lady Olive Nugent in consequence of her son's death, might be reckoned the circumstance that she had quitted Glenoona for good only a few months before her favourite sister, Dorothy Arfeld, came to settle there.

This crookedly happening event was possible because Lady Dorothy's brother-in-law, Charles Arfeld, owner of the Hall, had died in the course of the winter following the tragedy at Drumkyle Park, slipping out of this world wherein he had played the futile part of a recluse bachelor and chronic invalid, and had left a place that could be filled up without much difficulty.

It is, however, far from probable that he would have been succeeded in residence at the Hall by his brother and heir, Henry Arfeld, only for the seemingly irrelevant fact that the latter had not long since become possessed of a telescope.

By reason of a small agency business Henry had long made his home in suburban London; and, moreover, despite a country bringing-up, his

tastes were anything but rural or bucolic. The mellowed shabbiness of the second-hand book-seller's wares, or even the garish litter on railway-station stalls, interested him vastly more than the most thriving field-crop or brilliant garden-bed. So far, indeed, did he carry his indifference to these that he occasionally found himself rather embarrassed by its results in his literary efforts, as when, for example, he described a midsummer garden adorned with hollyhocks, lavender and daffodils, all in full blossom, and had the blunder published, on commission. For he was very ambitious, hankering chiefly after a poet's fame, at which mark he aimed several small volumes of verse, produced with slow elaboration, and given to the world at his own expense. It was well for him financially that he could not complete one every year.

The history of each is the history of all. First, a calm period of lingering composition; then another of gloating proof revision, rapt in dreams of glory to come; next, an expectant hush, following the day when "A Handful of Speedwell," or "A Wind-Borne Medley," as the case might be, was offered to the public; and finally—blank disappointment, tempered sometimes, and sometimes intensified, by press-notices, always strangely few, and not seldom inexplicably indiscriminating.

Repetition never dulled the keen edge of his wife's astonishment, which she expressed incisively to the half-dozen friends from whom she could

practically extort an opinion. She preserved their appreciative letters, along with the more laudatory of the reviews, in an album very superfluously capacious.

As for Henry Arfeld, he was perhaps rather less innocently sanguine than Lady Dorothy, and more prone to sinister suspicions about the causes of this seeming coldness. Yet it is unlikely that any chagrin and mistrust of himself or of others, thereby engendered, would alone have availed to divert him, even temporarily, from his literary ambitions.

About this time, however, a new interest which came into his life did so co-operate with the failure of his last volume in opening and recommending a different channel for his endeavours. A friendly neighbour, going abroad, presented him with a telescope large enough to require a little wooden house of its own, standing on piles like a bathing-box, and with a collection of astronomical books. These included a portly "History of the Moon," the more descriptive portions of which he read with avidity: the strictly scientific aspects of things did not appeal to him.

Astronomy had always attracted him in a vague sort of manner, the magnificent distances of the starry firmament enthralling his imagination, and often furnishing themes for his song; but now all his interest centred itself on our dead satellite, whose great bleached disc, ghostly with dried-up oceans and extinct volcanoes, had been brought



into his ken. He never wearied of focusing patches of her glistening plaster-of-Paris surface ; and when this could not be done he busied himself with books on the subject, poring eagerly over elaborate maps and charts.

So exclusively did these studies occupy his mind that his discourse might sometimes have argued him a dweller by the rigid margin of the Mare Serenitatis rather than in a briskly moving London suburb. The huge craters of Copernicus and Aristarchus and the Palus Somnii were seemingly as familiar to him as if his daily walks had been taken in their neighbourhood. Thus far had he fled from the sorrowful scene of disparaging critics and an apathetic public ; nor was the purely impersonal nature of his pleasure as yet adulterated by more than the faintest and remotest trace of a notion that here might be found a possible route to fame.

That was why his wife never dissembled her indifference to his new occupation, she being a person whom only the promise of some definite advantage accruing to her husband or her three children could detach from household affairs. She had thought of Henry as a probable Poet Laureate, but not as an Astronomer Royal. Nothing, except a conviction that remonstrance would be vain, made her disguise the regret with which she found their long journey to the south of Ireland encumbered by the transport of the telescope and all its paraphernalia.

In point of fact, the consideration that at the top of the high-sloping Hall garden he would have a capital site for his observatory was what chiefly determined him to become a resident landlord. If he had realised the extreme roughness of the last stage of the road along which his precious instrument must needs be jolted, he would probably have remained an absentee; and if he had known about a casualty that actually happened on this part of the way, he would certainly have suffered extreme perturbation. But the incident never reached his ears.

It occurred at Dan Moriarty's Place, a small tavern in Glenoona village, whose business was increased on a rainy spring evening by the stoppage there for refreshments of three or four carts conveying the Arfelds' luggage from Dermotstown railway station.

One of these, driven by young Barney Lauder, pulled up with such an unwary jerk that several items of its load fell off on the rugged and bemired cobblestones, a piece of clumsiness for which he received severe censure from Peter Connell, the head of the caravan, who had halted in front of him.

"Bad luck to you, man," Peter said, in substance, for epithets and expletives need not be given in full. "What sort of tatterin' have you there? Is it draggin' the legs from under the baste you'd be, and slingin' everything about you right and left?"

"Was it runnin' into you full tilt you'd have me?" Barney said, descending from his seat on the cart-shaft. "And yourself blockin' the road as unhandy as a blamed ould turf-stack. Them contrhaptions that's after comin' loose is nothin' only a couple of rolls of carpets, and this little affair"—he picked up a small, square wooden case—"that's took no hurt on it."

"Has it not? Bejabers then, you couldn't tell but it's all joggled to atoms of destruction in the inside of it," said Peter. "And nothing worser you could choose to go fire off the yoke, for himself was biddin' me be handlin' it most precautions, by raison of its aisy gettin' bruck."

"Then why the devil wasn't it roped on firmer?" said Barney, wiping the case alternately with his sleeve and his cap, both of which were extremely wet. "But anyhow I see ne'er a dint on the ould outworks of it, and I should suppose that's all consarns us."

To this conjecture Peter replied with irony:

"Is it all that consarns us, bedad? It's all you know about it, sure enough, to be so supposin', and the thing belongin' to them furrin Germans. There isn't a knock happens e'er a one of their packages but you may depind them Arfelds can tell of it better than you could yourself."

"Musha then themselves is apt to be the quare people," Barney said incredulously.

"You may say so," Peter said with emphasis, and a dark meaning which Barney, who was from

a different district, uninhabited by furriners, did not fathom, being unaware that the Palatines' descendants are generally credited by their neighbours with the possession of uncanny occult gifts, commonly taking the form of clairvoyance.

"Och, for the matter of that," said Barney, "I'd as lief, or liefer, be talkin' sinsible."

Whereupon Peter resented the innuendo in a manner which only for the intervention of bystanders would have delayed their arrival at the Hall by at least the length of an up and down fight.

The internal injuries which Peter Connell predicted might well have taken place, as the deal case enclosed a mahogany box containing minor accessories of the telescope, perilously fragile. Their owner's anxious examination, however, descried no trace of even the most trivial damage, so that he was able, with a relieved mind, to set about the re-erection of his little observatory.

To accomplish this in unsophisticated Glenoona was no simple matter, and for a time it seemed as if his instrument, having escaped the dangers of the journey, would thenceforth lack a safe resting-place. But at length he found an intelligent Dermotstown carpenter, who successfully carried out his instructions, and was not baffled by the strange device of the sliding roof, hauled to and fro with pulleys in a way disapproved by numerous lookers-on.

As indeed the like had never been seen or heard tell of by any of them it is needless to say that

the whole thing was viewed with strong disfavour. Rose Anne Magrath, bound for the yard with a bowl of eggs, met old Widow Byrne at the gate, and reported that coming along by the garden-wall she was just after getting a sight of them pulling the white top off of the green shed all of a piece, the same as you might take and cut the top off of one of thim eggs and it boiled—most unnatural looking.

At her the old widow slightly shook a head hampered by its covering of two caps, three shawls, and a heavy cloth hood.

“Long sorry I’d be, me dear, to get under any such a roof,” she said; and as Rose Anne was passing in at the gate, barred it momentarily with a tremulous stick, to whisper huskily: “There’s apt to be bad work in it, ma’am. Mark my words, they’re quare ones. And her ladyship’s keepin’ the loaves of bread in the big crock up above in the parlour, and has them counted, the same as the ould mistress done. Sure signs on it—they’s the only sort would demean theirselves to take up wid furriners like the Arfelds.”

Henry Arfeld, however, was well satisfied when the job had been finished. The situation of his observatory was all that could be wished, not inconveniently remote, yet beyond the range of the boys’ and Evangeline’s noisy romps, and commanding sky-scapes wide and unobstructed.

All his apparatus was in capital working order, and he thirsted to begin his observations, for

which only clear weather lacked, so he was much irked by the long spell of rain following his arrival. Night after night an unlifted cloud-canopy confronted him, hiding as, tantalised, he knew, the moon in phases most favourable for the astronomer's purpose.

Day by day the world dripped all round him. Sheets of smooth grey mist slanted between him and the opposite hills. The rain was so steady that each straw in the thatched eaves had its swelling drop to let fall as regularly as the clock ticks. Runnels of water coursed twisting down the mossed paths in the steep garden, which he often traversed on his way to read in the observatory, where he kept his books and charts, for he beguiled the tedious time by poring over them with redoubled zeal, still giving most attention to lunar topography.

Now it was that ambitious thoughts first occurred to him in connection with the subject.

As he studied his big maps he began to say to himself that much remained to be discovered; that many discoveries seemed to have come about more or less by chance; that a chance might, of course, happen to anybody, especially if he was on the look-out for things of the kind. Suppose, for instance, that some great convulsion of nature took place on the surface of the moon, the collapse, say, of a volcano's central cone, shattering the floor of its crater: such a catastrophe would be visible through his instrument, and there was no



reason why he might not become its earliest observer.

Thence he would doubtless derive some honour and glory, which might be permanently recorded in scientific lore. When he spread open his lunar maps he saw them, with his mind's eye, inscribed with his name. "Arfeld's Chasm" was the form in which it most frequently occurred, and it took his fancy not a little; sometimes he even went so far as to scribble it dreamily on used envelopes and prospectuses.

As he pursued his studies in an impatient, though, on the whole, not unhappy, spirit, he nothing recked that he was being regarded with grave suspicion by many of his neighbours, to whom the return of the family to the Hall had brought some disappointment.

It had been anticipated that the new owners would bring back at least the comparative liveliness of the old master's days, which were still recalled with regret, though the old mistress was always considered rather near and niggardly; defects not by any means surprising in "one of them Suttons from Crossgarry." Indeed, seeing that Mr. Henry's wife was no less than an earl's daughter, a marked aggrandisement might reasonably be expected.

But nothing of the sort ensued. On the contrary, whereas even poor Mr. Charles had occasionally driven out in the large carriage and pair, which was something to stand and stare after on roads

where such objects are few, his successors sold it, keeping only the yellow cob and the old ass, with Terence MacElvery single-handed in the stable. The whole establishment was proportionately reduced, giving less work both indoors and out, innovations which were naturally regarded with disfavour, and inclined people to take sinister views of anything else unusual that they noticed about the Arfelds.

Thus Mr. Henry's astronomical studies became a subject of much animadversion.

What at all was that outlandish little gazebo that he had, cocked up there at the top of the garden? and what took him to be streeling out to it at every hour of the dark night, and he with the whole length of the day for doing anything he wanted? And if the contrivance he kept there was a telescope itself, what call had he to be so particular about spying at the moon and stars, that would go the way God Almighty had set them, whatever anybody done, unless it was something he had a right to leave alone?

Questions such as these were repeatedly asked, and the replies which they elicited did not tend to clear the character of the suspect.

Pat Mulcahy, father of an ex-garden boy, advanced a theory that star-gazing of the kind was just as apt as not to put it into the Almighty's head to draw a trail of clouds slap across the sky, the way people would be hindered of meddling and making and passing remarks on what didn't

concern them. He added that if they didn't get some reasonable weather very presently the potatoes would be rotting in the ground on them instead of growing, as sure there was a crown in his hat.

None of Pàt's hearers could doubt that the latter statement was quite true, and many of them had an impression that this proved the former to be true likewise; the result of which was a vague feeling that Mr. Henry had something to do with the continued wetness of the season. Although he did often express wishes for fine weather quite as sincere as those of his neighbours, they were not misled into assuming that he shared their anxieties, or was even capable of rightly understanding them. His own discourse, indeed, argued the contrary.

One evening, for instance, he met in a splashy shrubbery walk Peter Connell, who remarked that it was a soft night, in allusion to the downpour which pattered on the leaves.

"By Jove! it is," Henry Arfeld replied with chagrin, "and I fear there's no chance of its clearing while she's up. It's most disappointing, for we shan't have another favourable opportunity this month."

"To be sure, I dunno what to say to it, your Honour," Peter assented, "unless we might get some sort of a change, plase goodness, at the new moon."

"Ah, but then," Henry said discontentedly,

"it will be impossible to take observations of the streaks about Tycho, which was what I particularly wanted to do. I suppose you're busy getting your potatoes down, Connell?" he added, as an after-thought, wishing to show an intelligent interest in Peter's concerns, "though this rain must delay you."

On the spot Peter only said :

"Aye, bedad, is it, Mr. Henry—as unhandy as anything; and good-night to you kindly, sir."

But he declared afterwards to some of his friends, whom he fell in with at the bridge a bit down the road, that if poor Mr. Henry had any wits at all, keeping them locked up he must be in his odd little house above.

"Puttin' down pitaties in the middle-end of May," Pat Mulcahy commented, "and he livin' in a reasonable part of the counthry most of the days of his life! It's surprisin' how he contrived to get raired wid that little knowledge about things."

"I wouldn't wonder if it was the outlandish sort of larnin' them colleges do be givin' the students," said Peter. "Very belike it might drain off whatever sinse they had in their minds to goodness may tell where; and that's why himself's after settin' up his ould peep-show yonder, instead of mindin' the things before his eyes."

"After takin' a look in at the little window of it I am to-day when he was gone to his luncheon," said Jim Finegan, a gossoon of the party. "Stan-

din' on a lump of a big stone you can see in grand."

"A very bold brat you were, then, to be doin' any such a thing," his mother said, chiefly from the force of habit. "And what was there in it?"

"Nothin' at all was in it," Jim replied, because he resented being called a brat.

"Don't let me hear tell of you bein' up there again," his mother enjoined, with unfeigned asperity; "it's no place for childer."

In this view Mr. Henry would have entirely concurred. He forbade the vicinity of the observatory to his own somewhat unruly three, and guilefully represented to them that his occupation there was nothing more attractive than the working of enormous sums.

Yet on one of the very few occasions when he caught a glimpse of the moon that spring, he voluntarily showed the sight to little Minnie Ree, as she came by along with Mrs. Cramer, who was fetching her in to tea out of the dim garden gloaming.

The quietness of the child, as contrasted with the hoydenishness of her elder, Evangeline, and a feeling of commiseration roused by her strangely derelict circumstances, may have led him to accord the privilege; but, however kindly meant, the exhibition was not a success, for the scenery which swung into the field while she looked struck her as being so drearily odd that, seized with a sudden panic, she fled away from the observatory, and thenceforth shunned its neighbourhood. That

she thought it looked like a sort of old place built by some very dreadful little giants, was her only explanation of her alarm.

Another person's fear had been the cause of Minnie's presence at the Hall. It had happened one evening, many weeks earlier in the spring, that Elizabeth Cramer was looking out of a front window at Drumkyle over the wood-girdled lawn. The sky was covered with clouds, but a full moon floated behind them, and her veiled light made a pallid greyiness on the grass.

Suddenly Elizabeth became aware of a faint shadow moving across it—a formless shadow, such as might have been thrown down by the passage of a darker cloud. This was perhaps all that she saw with her bodily eyes, but into her mind on the moment came the remembrance of poor Mr. Claude, whom she had so often watched going along, as slowly and haltingly as a cloud-shadow scarcely stirred by a breeze. And thereupon she began to think of him with pity and hope and wishes, which her Protestant principles would have forbidden her to call prayers, if she had considered the matter.

Many a time after that evening, by day or by night, did she see this apparition pass, more or less dimly shadow-like, but always following the same track, slowly always, and as it were feebly, across the lawn towards the edge of the wood, until lost to sight among the firs, where the steep path climbs to the ridge. From the first she



never doubted that what she beheld was of no earthly origin ; though, standing beside her, some other spectators, who had not been reared in the atmosphere of Glenoona, would probably have noticed nothing except a natural shifting of indistinct gleams and glooms.

She did not mention the subject to her neighbours ; not that she apprehended any ridicule from them, for she was, in fact, quite prepared to hear of their having had the like experiences, but because she thought herself fortunate in being able to keep the thing a secret, safe from vexing the heart of poor Lady Olive with tidings of a restless spirit.

If nothing more had happened, a notion of fear, much less of flight, would never have occurred to Elizabeth, but once, as she turned away from looking through the twilight across the lawn, she found that little Miss Minnie, at her elbow, had seen what she had seen.

" Were you watching anything, Miss Minnie, alanna ? " she said.

Minnie did not withdraw her intent and puzzled gaze while she said, more as if arguing with herself than replying :

" He used to walk along just that way ; but how could it be he—poor Mr. Claude ? "

For the moment Elizabeth diverted her from the speculation by declaring it high time that she had her bread and honey and milk as a preliminary to bed, and assured her that there was not, and could not be, anybody on the lawn.

Her own mind, however, had been seized by a harassing dread. Suppose that the child should again see this shadow or phantom—call it what you will—and be led into following it? Elizabeth had heard of such things happening.

Often enough Miss Minnie was alone out of doors, or rambling about the big, empty house, and now the lengthening daylight would increase that danger. What if she passed up through the steep fir-grove, and on to the ridge where she would be near the brink of those fatal cliffs? This question left Elizabeth no peace until she had written to Mr. Considine giving up her place, on the grounds that Drumkyle was grown too lonesome altogether. She grieved to do so, foreboding separation from her charge, who was great company; but such direful risks must not, she felt, be run.

Now it happened that just about this time Lady Dorothy Arfeld, at the other end of Glenoona, was striving to make presentable, in some degree, the Hall's dingy and dilapidated interior. Need to practise strict economy complicated the problem of repairing and embellishing, and the news that Elizabeth Cramer was disengaged, at once suggested the possibility of securing an invaluable assistant, notoriously skilled in every kind of needlecraft.

Elizabeth could cut out and make up new stuffs to perfection, and refurbish old ones till they looked better than new. Her grandmother had taught her how to darn in imitation of texture

and pattern, so that traces of a former hole might be sought in vain.

Accordingly Lady Dorothy lost no time about driving over on the old car to Drumkyle Park, and asking Mrs. Cramer to come and work for a while at the Hall; furthermore, upon finding that the bestowal of Minnie Ree was a difficulty, she willingly extended her invitation to the little girl. Thus it fell out that Minnie had her unappreciated glimpse of the moon.

Her visit included few such disagreeable incidents. The Hall afforded the materials, simple enough, generally necessary to her contentment. Indoors she could grub undisturbed among the dusty shelves of the bookroom, while beyond it Evangeline and her brothers, instinctively perceiving that this strange contemporary would neither enjoy nor enliven their noisy games, let her alone, in no unfriendly spirit on the boys' part, though on their sister's with disdain.

Some degree of jealousy was indeed raised by her admission into the observatory, but soon subsided, and all the sooner because she so evidently had not been in the least elated by the privilege. The report she gave of her dismal experiences diminished Hal's and Evangeline's eagerness for a view, though it whetted Otto, their elder brother's curiosity, which he harboured undutiful schemes for gratifying.

Visits to Elizabeth Cramer's mother-in-law were an agreeable feature in Minnie's stay at the Hall.

Old Mrs. Cramer lived just opposite the entrance gate in a cottage with a wide-spreading, thatched roof, cocked into several little gables. At the foot of a steep bank it stood considerably below the level of the road, whence it was reached by a wooden stair, descending under a canopy of creepers. A vast scarlet fuchsia cased the cottage walls, seldom without a smouldering fire of blossom, and often deeply aglow.

Indoors there was a spacious, pleasant kitchen, full of lights and shadows flickering and glancing, and as redolent of comfort as of the fresh peat-smoke, which made a faint blue haze in the corners, for the family of Elizabeth's parents-in-law had long been prosperous in a small way, and signs thereof were everywhere visible.

The woman of the house was a pretty old dame, as pink and white as one of her own rose-patterned cups, and she had a good-natured daughter Annie, always willing to exhibit the charming curiosities in which the room abounded. They comprised sundry old toys and nick-nacks, some of which had arrived along with the original emigrants, and had been treasured with inherited regard, whilst others were the product of handicrafts transmitted from generation to generation. These things were a source of pleasure to Minnie Ree, when she accompanied Elizabeth Cramer or Lady Dorothy to the cottage.

Under the régime of the former Mrs. Arfeld, the present Mrs. Willester, there had been much inter-

course between the Cramers and the inmates of the Hall. Anna and Frances Arfeld, serious-minded young persons, were assiduous in attending service at the little Moravian Chapel six miles off at Simonstown, and had often driven over to it on Sunday Mrs. Cramer, who was, with a few modifications, of the same way of thinking.

Then on a week-day they would visit her, and generally have readings out of the large family Bible, the black stuff cover of which had been a sombre object, until Mrs. Cramer had embroidered it thickly with crimson and moss-green worsted, in elaborate stitches learnt from her grandmother.

She would have liked best to hear the blander passages—promises and prophecies of smooth things, in which she somehow contrived to imagine all the wicked world sharing—but the young ladies, more logically, had avoided the convenient heresy of selection, and had read on without picking or choosing, not turning to the right hand or the left, let them come where they might—and they came into some rough places.

Lady Dorothy now followed the example of her sisters-in-law in visiting Mrs. Cramer, but omitted the lecture. Her interests lay mainly in domestic directions, and she found her hostess full of recipes and other household lore, matters on which they held long discourse, while little Minnie, who frequently was of the party, had entertainment much to her mind.

Great was her delight in the quaint little wooden

models of buildings : the windmill whose sails you could blow round, causing it to pump real water out of a tank ; the barn with its heaps of grain, and empty sacks, which it was permissible to fill ; the lighthouse from whence a candle-end, round which revolved variously-coloured lantern-panes, flung gleams of ruby, sapphire, and topaz.

Her admiration became almost awe when she surveyed the samplers on which the needle had wrought, in solid high-relief, not only flowers and fruit, but objects such as fans, wheels, and tobacco-pipes. A black silk bottle, with a white darning-cotton label, and a red wool stopper, *which came out*, was perhaps the crowning achievement of this marvellous stitchery.

Then she loved to open the tiny egg-shaped, finely plaited baskets, and to set the snow-storm raging, imprisoned mysteriously within the shaken crystal ball.

Only one drawback alloyed these diversions, and that was the occasional presence of old Joanna Garsted. To this Minnie was not liable when she visited the cottage with Lady Dorothy, for on the appearance of Quality Joanna retreated into some secluded corner, where she would groan and mutter unseen and scarcely heard ; but if Minnie went accompanied by Elizabeth Cramer, the risk always had to be encountered, and it was a meeting from which the little girl shrank.

Old Joanna's aspect was by no means prepossessing. Her short stature was further dimi-



nished by a prone stoop, and many ragged skirts, beneath a vast black cloth cloak, broadened her out incredibly. The leathery visage that lifted itself up to peer forth from amongst cap-frills and hood-folds had red-rimmed eyes and a bristly grey beard, and a crooked, withered hand, protruded, was apt to clutch and paw at Minnie's clothes, or even her face.

Once, however, as she considered how those horrible assaults might be averted without impossible rudeness, an expedient occurred to her, so that the next time she found herself within arm's length of Joanna :

"I am a fairy child," Minnie said, slowly and distinctly, "and it is a thing that brings bad luck to touch me."

Her object was gained by the statement. Having looked hard at her for a few anxious moments, old Joanna nodded twice or thrice acquiescently, and, turning away, thenceforward kept at a desirable distance.

To most of Glenoona's inhabitants there would have seemed nothing at all incredible in Minnie's account of herself, which was based upon a speculation suggested by her sense that she belonged to nobody, and might be really a changeling, such as she had heard tell of in the neighbours' talk.

A slender thread of kinship gave the entry of the Cramers' dwelling to this ill-favoured crone, who would otherwise have been neither a welcome nor an appropriate guest. Ever since their simul-

taneous settlement at Glenoona, the fortunes of the Cramers and Garsteds had gone on diverging from practically the same level, those of the Garsteds continuously taking a downward trend, until the deep-sunken boreen, and sharply-falling slope which lay between the two homes, appeared to symbolise a coming down in the world.

They were for the most part a dejected, unenterprising family, not over-well liked, and old Joanna, a survival from by-gone generations, was very much its most unpopular member, not only because everybody believed her to possess uncanny powers, but because nobody doubted that she used these upon occasion to the detriment of persons against whom she had a grudge.

Throughout that inclement spring the gloom of the Garsteds had deepened, and with good reason, for their few small fields, which lay along the river, and were at the best of times marshy bits of land, now under the incessant rain began rapidly to lose the character of any kind of land at all.

Grey-gleaming water made miniature canals among the potato-drills, and lakes in every hollow of the spongy grass, where five head of cattle, and some half a score of sheep mounted disconsolately the little hillocks in quest of drier pasturage, while the wild river, fleeting past, threatened more and more fiercely to swoop in on them, and swirl them away from their precarious refuge.

The same menace hung more or less imminently over the whole valley, in forms varying from

sudden submergence to gradual growth of treacherous quagmires. And still through the lengthening days the rain poured steadily on, nor ever paused long enough to let the heavy boughs cease from dripping ; and if the mists climbed a little way up the sodden hill-slopes, as seldom happened, or thinned into faint, silvery brightness, the drenched country-side only looked the wetter.

Nobody, not even the oldest, remembered the likes of such a season. Dan McFarlane himself declared that he did not know what to say to it, and there were not many subjects on which Dan could not offer an explanatory opinion. Certain facts, however, seemed indisputably clear to all, as : that unless the weather took up before long, the potatoes would be entirely destroyed ; the oats would never get sown, nor the turf cut ; and the floods would come down the river.

## CHAPTER IX

### THE CRACK OF DOOM

MEANWHILE Henry Arfeld sat poring over books and maps, often in his little observatory, where the drops pattered loudly on the resonant wooden roof. Their sound sometimes penetrated into his studies, and whenever he left off reading, or dreaming about glories won by astronomical discoveries, he listened to it with impatience. His ambitious visions made him chafe and fret at the sight of his unemployed telescope pointed aimlessly at nothing, while he felt that his opportunities for research were slipping away.

At last, after several discontented weeks, there came a night when the dense clouds broke, and disclosed for two or three hours a large moon floating in a clear space polished by her own beams.

Thereupon Dan McFarlane remarked with some bitterness that it was like the contrariness of the weather to take up just when a stroke of work couldn't be done; and his mother suggested consolatorily that it might be better so than to have anything you set about ruined with the rain.

beginning again as soon as you were well started. But, more fortunate, Henry Arfeld was able to avail himself of this interval, and he used it to good purpose. What he saw amazed him much.

On the following night the same thing happened again, with the result that for some time after his observations were ended by the returning clouds he sat lost in thought. Though he seemed to be promised fulfilment of his aspirations, the manner in which it had come about forbade him to rejoice or triumph. Rather he had a sense of guilty responsibility, as if his wishes had entailed the form in which they were about to be granted.

The upshot of it was that the murky sunrise found him on his way to Dublin, and that in the course of the next day he handed his card to the Astronomer Royal's servant, requesting an interview.

This he obtained only in part. Very complicated and troublesome calculations were at the moment occupying the Astronomer Royal and his assistant, so that the former had no leisure, and the latter but little, to bestow upon an unknown caller, more especially one who was fraught with a discovery.

So when Mr. Wray, politely forbearing, had listened, in appearance at least, to an excitedly incoherent statement, and had asked two or three questions which elicited the fact that the stranger was destitute of science, he lost no time in

impressing upon Mr. Arfeld the expediency of forthwith making further observations at home, and committing them to paper, as the only means whereby he could do justice to them, and gain for them the attention that they merited. Personal interviews were always much less to be desired, for the long journey from Glenoona led to a waste of valuable hours—and minutes, quoth Mr. Wray, were an astronomer's golden grains.

Accordingly, on this hint, Mr. Arfeld departed, half flattered by Mr. Wray's suavity, yet half suspicious that the powers that be were setting their faces jealously against his claims to scientific distinction, just as they had already slighted his poetical work.

But on further considering the subject, while he journeyed home, he was disposed to think it lucky that he had been grudged an opportunity for giving the details of his discovery, since he thus incurred the less risk of seeing it dishonestly appropriated. The advice to set it down in writing did not, he admitted, look like any such intention; he inferred, rather, a wish to make light of and belittle what, in proud fits, he called his achievement.

That conclusion would have mortified him more, had not his vanity been held in abeyance by the claims of more serious sentiments. They arose as he contemplated the discovery under its graver aspect, to which he became increasingly alive; for the longer he considered it, the keenlier did he



realise all that it involved, and the less able was he to dismiss it from his thoughts.

Of course they were preponderantly self-regarding. As the scope of his views widened out from that central point, vivid clearness merged at first into misty vagueness; still he was not by any means oblivious of the world beyond his own little domestic circle. Though he could not forbear to feel how precarious would be his tenure of any fame accruing from the revelation, he dwelt more and more upon the portentous shadow, which, if things were as he supposed, must thenceforward darken the future, perhaps the near future, of mankind.

Before he reached home he had begun to wish almost whole-heartedly that subsequent observations might prove him utterly in error.

The very wet night after his return, however, clearing up for an hour or so, gave him the half-desired, half-dreaded opportunity, with the result that his belief was startlingly, astoundingly confirmed.

Only by a strong effort of self-control could he in some degree dissemble the perturbation of his mind, and his success in doing so was imperfect enough to cause Lady Dorothy much uneasiness. She surmised that he had been consulting a Dublin doctor, who had pronounced him afflicted with some fatal malady.

As the following day wore away he found the burden of his uncommunicated secret press too

heavily upon him, so that when, in the course of the afternoon, there arrived a person in whom he thought it fairly prudent to confide, he seized the chance of imparting his cause for anxiety.

This visitor, who called to collect a subscription, was Father Aloysius Kelly, the priest of the parish, whither he had somewhat newly come. Not very long ago he had been completing his education in a sunny old Spanish town, where a dearth of compatriots' society had driven him to acquire the natives' soft-syllabled tongue, and a taste for literature had led him to frequent a library well stored with dramas and romances.

Since those pleasanter days, his quarters had been in several Irish towns and villages, so scantily provided with reading materials that his baulked appetite for such pursuits began to dwindle away, and was replaced unsatisfactorily by a trifling with cards.

At no time had he taken, or been encouraged to take, any interest in scientific matters; still he was far from sharing, and even further from wishing to appear to share, his flock's ignorant prejudices against Mr. Arfeld's philosophical instruments.

For this reason he made it his business to introduce the subject of astronomy, and expressed rather more enthusiasm than he felt about his host's studies, but added with some genuine envy :

"You've got a grand big theme, Mr. Arfeld, to be working your mind upon. I suppose, now,

that a man who knows much about what's going on behind those clouds above us need never have an unoccupied moment."

Thus incited Henry Arfeld began a discourse, which was not soon brought to an end. He perceived that his hearer was mightily impressed by a few technical terms, and this emboldened him to speak with confidence and authority. Moreover, his strong feeling about the facts which he related made his language vivid and picturesque.

When Father Kelly had been listening for fully half an hour his lean, dark face—he was of the small, spare, black-avised type--wore a distressed look, not, however, caused by boredom.

"Evidently," he said, "we must in that case be prepared for an appalling disaster."

They were sitting at a little table in the observatory, whither they had adjourned to see some diagrams, and he had before him a large, round portrait of the moon's face, across which Henry Arfeld had just pencilled a very dark streak. It almost bisected the disc, zigzagging through the centre, and splitting into several branches at a point where it reached the circumference.

"I was shocked," Henry Arfeld said, leaning over and tapping it there with his pencil, "to see, on my return, how far these fissures had extended, since I noticed them first only last week. If that rate continues, the catastrophe can't be long delayed."

Father Kelly replied :

"Tchuck, tchuck," and gazed blankly at the disfigured orb.

"They have certainly widened, and, so far as I can judge, deepened," said Henry Arfeld. "I hope I may be able to take some observations to-night, but I fear there is little chance of a clear sky."

Rain, indeed, rustled all about them, and even glanced in through the small, square window, which seemed to have been blown open by the wintry-sounding wind.

"Should you be inclined, Mr. Arfeld," said Father Kelly, "to connect our present most unseasonable weather with the occurrence of this—this very formidable phenomenon?"

Mr. Arfeld, looking oracular, answered:

"That would be hard to say, but in my opinion it is, on the whole, more probable that our first experience of the effects will be some vast and violent convulsion of nature; such, for instance, as the sweeping in of an enormous tidal wave—the moon's influence on the tides being, as of course I needn't remind you, so irresistible in its action."

"Oh, aye, aye, to be sure," Father Kelly assented lugubriously. "A second Deluge is what we may expect in the circumstances."

"The Deluge!" said Mr. Arfeld. "The Deluge would be nothing to it—nothing at all! Why, that, according to the story, was simply an extensive flood, brought on more or less gradually by torrential rains; but here we should have the

lunar attraction suddenly abolished or diverted with incalculably ruinous consequences. No doubt they would include mountain-ranges of sea-water, miles high, piling themselves up to rage over the land. Imagine the front of a single wave, surpassing the Himalayas in length and height, and crested with foam for snow, flinging itself prone upon a continent—imagine a flock of such waves. Yet this is only one among a hundred methods by which our destruction may be brought about. For instance, it is very possible that a huge fragment of the moon may fall upon us, shattering us to pieces, and in that case our planet would probably be converted into a circling belt of asteroids. In fact, the only thing absolutely certain is that the falling asunder of the moon must produce a cataclysm, involving the utter annihilation of every form of animal life upon the surface of our globe. And this, to judge by the appearance of the crack, might now happen at any moment."

"Oh my! my!" Father Kelly said, shaking his head as he stared at the diagram. Then, after a pause: "And what, now, would you say—to what would you attribute the unhappy occurrence?"

"I am inclined to assign excessive desiccation and exposure to extremes of temperature as the immediate causes," said Henry Arfeld, "and my theory is confirmed by the result of a little experiment which I tried this morning. See here." He reached down from a shelf a lump of clay roughly spherical in shape. "I made this rude model of

the earth from gravelly soil, in a very moist condition," he said, not without pride, feeling that he had displayed some almost Darwinian patience and ingenuity, "and dried it rapidly on a small stove. You will perceive that it has cracked in a manner which is, allowing for the different circumstances, very strikingly similar to what I have observed on the surface of the moon."

He was handing the ball to Father Kelly, when all at once it fell in pieces, the largest of them dropping on the table, and another crumbling itself against his foot. Startled looks passed between the two men. Henry Arfeld exclaimed *Absit omen!* half in earnest, and Father Kelly uttered, quite solemnly, a pious ejaculation. Then he rose, and said that he must be going, whereupon his host expressed a wish that the moon had been telescopically visible.

"It would have seemed to me," said Father Kelly, "a very harrowing sight."

"Let me remind you," said Henry Arfeld, "that this is quite between ourselves. I have carefully refrained hitherto from mentioning the matter to anybody in the neighbourhood, for if a rumour got about it would give rise to a wild panic, which I shouldn't like to be the means of causing sooner than I can help. It's a pity to alarm the people prematurely and to no purpose: for what can anybody do?"

"I'll not let out a word to them, poor creatures," Father Kelly said as he descended the observatory



steps, hurriedly thrusting up his umbrella against the battering rain.

Nevertheless, as he splashed down the walk, he said to himself that his parishioners must be given some sort of warning; he wouldn't have it on his conscience to let them meet such an awful doom without any special preparation, so before he got home he had resolved to find some pretext for asking his Bishop to send Glenoona a missionary capable of preaching awakening sermons. Father Kelly distrusted his own powers of sensational oratory.

But meanwhile Henry Arfeld, as he turned the key in the observatory door, little thought that he was leaving behind him there two persons, who had been present all through his colloquy with Father Kelly, and who were now waiting for his departure, literally, with bated breath.

The fact was that his son Otto and little Murt Mulcahy, having feloniously entered at the open window, had been surprised by his arrival before they could make their escape, and had taken refuge behind a packing-case in a corner. Thence they had overheard and watched everything that passed between Mr. Arfeld and his visitor, or rather Murt had done so, Otto's dread of discovery having in a large measure distracted his attention, whereas Murt, confident that, if the worst happened, the brunt of the blame would fall upon his elder and better, possessed a mind sufficiently at ease to observe with much interest.

Part of what he saw and heard, as he peered round corners and through chinks, passed his comprehension, but he did not allow himself to be puzzled for long. His lively imagination speedily filled up any gaps left by his imperfect understanding, and enabled him to give his friends and neighbours a graphic account of all that the Master and his Reverence had said and done.

Murt told his story in public for the first time, at full length, and with abundant detail, a few evenings afterwards in the house of his mother's father, Stephen Garsted.

On the hearth a strong fire was burning, the result of a day-long struggle with damp and intractable materials, which the flame had at last been coaxed into seizing with so firm a grip that a flare-up and geyser of sparks followed each flinging down on the red-hot bank of more turf sods, murky and ill-dried. The people, gathered about it in a semi-circle, were as fain of the warmth as if the night had been a winter's one instead of on the threshold of June; for the wind, fledged with rain, was high and chilly, and many of them had been subject to its roughness throughout a great part of the day.

Even now the unkindly weather appeared to pursue them by sending in under the closed door's sill several long, wedge-shaped streams of water, which advanced across the mud-floor in jerks, corresponding with ruffings of the large, wind-swept puddle outside. Here and there one of

them would pause on its way to fill up a hollow in the unlevel surface, but the foremost of them had already nearly reached the curved line of forms and stools, which seated the company in general.

The warm corners on the right and left hand of the hearth each held a high-backed chair, one of which was occupied by Mrs. Stephen Garsted, and the other by Andy Kinsella, the blind fiddler from Omoye. At his elbow squatted on a low, creepy stool old Joanna, who, deeming that her advanced age entitled her to the seat of honour and comfort, lay in wait to take his place the moment he moved from it. Meanwhile she bestowed on both him and the woman of the house glances malevolent enough to have entailed most serious consequences, had there been any virtue in an evil eye.

Nobody marked her, however, because all her neighbours were busy listening to little Murt Mulcahy, and cross-questioning him. His story had, of course, been heard by them before, but only in a more or less fragmentary way, and sometimes not at first hand. Nor had it, at the outset, acquired the circumstantial coherence, and several of the fearfully striking features, which it had by this time developed.

It was now drawn from him mainly in the form of the answers to a catechism, carried on for the most part by his mother and her sister Kate, who were already familiar enough with his narrative to be able to put judiciously leading ques-

tions. Startling indeed were the facts which they elicited.

Aye, bedad, Murt heard Mr. Arfeld telling his Reverence that he had the moon now, as near as anything, cracked right across, with his quare brass machine on the stand. Making shots at it he did be whenever he got a sight of it.

Murt's grandfather here thought that it was for to be looking through his Honour kep' the machine. And to be sure it was, Murt's mother explained ; for looking through first and foremost, and afterwards making shots at things. *Hadn't he it cocked up that way, Murt avic, taking aim at the sky ?* He had so.

And then he took and drew the crack on a picture of the moon to show Father Kelly. Murt couldn't get an over-good sight of it from where he was, but it looked to be as black as soot, and as long as his arm.

*And what was it they said would be apt to happen us, after the moon breaking in bits ?* Mr. Arfeld himself was saying that as like as not the big lumps would be falling down on top of everybody, and smashing them all into smithers ; or else, very belike, they might drop in the sea, beyant there, and rise it up in the most awful big waves, the height of the church-tower, that 'ud come wal-lop- ing along fit to swally all before them ; for just a one of them could fill up the whole of Glen-oona, slopping over the tops of the hills, as fast as a body'd fill a weeny cup out of the spout of a

two-gallon kettle—that was what his Honour had said.

At this home-touch a sensation, producing groans, thrilled the line of listeners, amongst whom were several makers, and many drinkers, of tea.

“Well now, if anybody asked *me*,” Dan McFarlane said, half defiantly, “it’s my belief you might be slapping a couple of dozen objies the size of the moon into a place the size of the say, for any great differ they’d make, let alone risin’ them outlandish description of waves on us.”

“Ah but, me good man,” rejoined Stephen Garsted, “I’ve heard tell that the moon’s a dale more sizable than you’d think just to look at her. On the paper I seen it.”

“Plenty she has to say to the weather, at all events,” said Micky Sheehan. “If it’s bad when she’s new, divil anything better there’ll be till she’s full again, that’s certain.”

*And you seen the Master showing his Riverence a pattron like of the way he had the moon destroyed, Murt alanna? Spake up about the lump of clay.*

Called back thus to his narrative, Murt related how Mr. Arfeld had a round ball of clay stuck up on a shelf, that he took down, and was telling Father Kelly he had it heating over the fire to try would it split, till he’d see what sort would be the readiest cracks for sundering the moon. And how Father Kelly said ’twas a great hardship on

the people, and no thing to go do ; but Mr. Arfeld just took and squeezed up the clay in his clenched hands, and bruck it to bits on the floor.

And he said that was the way the whole of them 'ud very presently be, and he bid Father Kelly to not let on a word about it to anybody. So his Riverence went off saying some kind 'of prayers to himself, and then the Master, by good luck, quit too, the way that Murt and Master Otto could get out at the window.

This statement impressed almost everybody deeply, but nobody more than old Joanna, and, in her case, no part of it so much as the mention of the clay-ball. At that hearing she pricked up her ears, while the angry gleam of her red-rimmed eyes, which had been flickering to and fro between Mrs. Stephen and the fiddler, seemed to concentrate itself upon some distant, invisible object of wrath. However, she only said darkly :

"There's more clay in it than ever Himself handled, and there's more than He that knows right well what to be doing with it—there is so."

The remainder of her reflections were even more ambiguously indicated by a wordless crooning and long-continued nodding of her head.

"Well now, it's as square as ever I heard," Mrs. Stephen Garsted declared to Mrs. Mulcahy on her right hand, "and what I never thought to hear tell of poor Mr. Henry. If it was a poor person, ma'am, that had no raison to be over-well con-



tented with the little he owned in the world, you mightn't so much wonder at his taking a notion to destroy all before him. But gintlefolks, with everything heart could wish ready to hand, so to spake—I dunno what would bewitch them."

"Is it gintlefolks? Musha, if that's all that ails you, ma'am," said Dan McFarlane, "them Arfelds is a bad offer at gintlefolks; just a pack of——" Furriners, he had nearly said, forgetful that he was addressing one of the despised race, whose house nothing except curiosity had induced him to enter; however, he checked himself in time, and indeed all the company were talking "through other" so loudly that his slip would hardly have been noticed.

It was during a lull that Murt Mulcahy's elder brother Joe, the Hall's ex-garden-boy, took occasion to observe:

"May the saints have my soul if I believe a word of it. Divil a bit of the Master, nor e'er a one of them up there, would go for to be playing any such tricks. Making fools of yous with his lies and romancing the young bosthoon is, and if somebody'd give him a clout on the head, and send him off to his bed, 'tis what would do him good."

In forming this opinion Joe was biased by the remembrance that the Master had presented him with five shillings over and above his wages when paying him off, and that her ladyship had always been very pleasant-spoken entirely; nor were

feelings of jealousy, roused by the prominent position into which Murt had started up, without their influence also.

His scepticism, unflatteringly expressed, was keenly resented by his brother, mother, and aunt, and would, no doubt, have met with a retort in kind, had not young Larminie at the same moment capered up from his seat in the middle of the semi-circle, exclaiming that something had him grabbed by the heel.

It proved, upon investigation, to be merely one of the long fingers protruded by the expanding puddle of rain-water, that had reached far enough in its progress over the floor to touch his bare foot. But the incident reminded his neighbours that the night was getting darker, and the road wetter every minute, a consideration which caused the party to break up.

When the house-door was opened, the hearth-fire flung out splashes of light, which fell on a pool spreading right across the way, and ruffled into ripples by fitful gusts. The drowned grass-border showed scarcely a blade above it, and all round it lost itself limitlessly in the vague shadows, seeming to justify Matt Rooney's comment that "them giants of waves wouldn't find much dry land left to swally, unless they come along at a hand-gallop." There were no pauses in the rain.

Stephen Garsted brought a blazing peat-sod on a large shovel, and stood lifting it up outside his door, that the flare might light his departing guests

past a deep hole a few yards down the road. If any of them had looked back they would have seen, standing behind him, the cloaked figure of old Joanna, who was shaking her fist at the blank blackness of the night in the direction of the Hall.

## CHAPTER X

### RUMOURS

CHRISTY CONSIDINE did not, on the whole, regret Mrs. Cramer's resignation of the caretakership at Drunkyle Park, because, when he heard of it, he presently bethought him that the post was likely to suit a person whom he would be glad to see comfortably settled. It seemed to him that a place where there were so few opportunities for quarrelling was rather thrown away upon a woman of Mrs. Cramer's placid and pacific temper, but might be just the thing for Nicholas Garvin, who had such a very dissimilar disposition.

Signs were not wanting, in reported extracts from his correspondence with Anastasia MacElvery, that the period during which he could bring himself to remain in Lady Olive's service was already approaching a close. He would not, indeed, have "put up with it that long," only for his concern about Miss Dormer, coupled with the fact that he was constructing a fountain, in the front grass-plot, on a plan of his own, which took his mind off his grievances.

Christy accordingly made it his business to find

a promising substitute for Nicholas, to whom he then offered the situation at Drumkyle. The proposal was greatly to Nicholas's mind, so much so that he accepted it with less demur than he felt to be altogether dignified. But he felt still more strongly that he could not afford to risk losing the chance, so he said only twice that he hardly thought it would be very apt to suit him; and his song about the strangeness of the world he was wandering through became lustier than usual.

It was his new employer's wish that he should betake himself to Glenoona without delay, and he had nothing to detain him in Dublin except the affair of the pearl necklace. Messrs. Gray & Eberle had not yet made him an offer for it, having discreetly, in view of its great value and rather mysterious antecedents, held the matter over, in case of further developments.

On the morning of his departure he found time for a hurried visit to their establishment, that he might notify his change of address. While he waited, with foot-tapping impatience, till the foreman was disengaged, he decided that it would be advisable for them to communicate directly with Anastasia MacElvery.

"She's a deal more settled in that quare little arbour in The Half-Square," he reflected, "than I'll be at Glenoona. As like as not I may have to streel off to some place else, and look after Miss Dormer. Or suppose anybody there had a notion

to be giving me any sort of impidence, and I wasn't rightly backed up agin them"—a recollection of his encounter with Mr. Considine's cook still rankled in Nicholas's mind—"it's not very long I'd draw me pay in them quarters, that's certain."

Therefore, when the first customer had at length reluctantly made up her mind that the half-guinea hat-pin was a much more graceful design than any of the others, which were all dearer, and the foreman said: "Now, sir," Nicholas requested him to inform Miss Anastasia MacElvery of Gentian Chalet, The Independency, Rathkennan, as soon as he had fixed what he would be offering for the pearl necklace.

"Is it this lady's property, may I ask?" Mr. King enquired, as he took down the address, which Nicholas dictated from the top of a sheet of note-paper.

"As good as, in a matter of business," Nicholas replied.

"'Independency' did I understand you to say?" queried Mr. King, reading over his entry, to gain time for contemplating this new aspect of the affair.

"Right enough you have it," said Nicholas. "The Half-Square they call it, but that's the way it's wrote."

"A somewhat singular address," Mr. King remarked.

"And a singular spot it is, bedad," said Nicholas. "Howsome'er, there's more permanency attached



to it than to the place I'm making for ; and I'll bid her be writing me word whenever she hears anything from you."

He went off in haste to catch the train, without having perceived the presence of an elderly lady, who had entered the shop soon after him, and whom he might have recognised as Lady Olive's sharp-nosed, circumspectuous visitor. Nor would her eyes, keen and observant though they were, in this case have led her to any interesting discovery, as even if she had known him to be Nicholas Garvin, she would merely have supposed that he was there on his mistress's business.

A familiar name reaching her while she waited to enquire about an invalided watch, made her prick up her ears and take note of the common-looking man who had mentioned Miss MacElvery and Gentian Chalet. When he went on to speak of a pearl necklace, Mrs. Willester's interest grew so extreme that she scarcely refrained from intervening in the conversation. She did actually make a little rush towards Nicholas as he left the shop, but she was not in time to intercept him.

"Who is that person?" she asked, with undisguised eagerness ; and the foreman replied :

"His name is Garvin—Nicholas Garvin ; employed as a *gardener*, I understand."

He mentioned this calling with some lofty aloofness of tone, which, however, was quite outdone by Mrs. Willester's as she responded :

"Garvin ? Oh, then he is in the employment

of my friend Lady Olive Nugent—my son's sister-in-law."

"Indeed, madam!" the foreman said, much impressed. "Lady Olive and the Earl, her ladyship's father, are very old customers of our firm. Garvin *has* been with her ladyship, but leaves to-day, so he tells me."

"He gave you his address, though?" Mrs. Willester said sharply. "I hope so, for it's very important that there should be no delay."

Then, seeing that Mr. King looked surprised and puzzled, she hastily explained:

"I've reason to believe that those pearls are stolen."

But again admonished, by his startled expression, that she had spoken too precipitately, she began to soften down her speech:

"That is, I'm inclined to think that the necklace you were talking about belongs to my husband's daughter-in-law. Could you let me see it?"

The intricacy of Mrs. Willester's family connections appeared to Mr. King rather awe-inspiring. He said: "Certainly, madam," and at once produced the necklace.

As the pearls and diamonds gleamed like some fairly radiant hoar-frost on their violet velvet bed, Mrs. Willester eyed them with hopeful and impatient covetousness. She had never seen the ornaments before, but she knew that Mrs. Hume had possessed such a necklace and pendant, and she nothing doubted that these were they.

"Immense, and a lovely colour," she said to herself aloud, "and the brilliants set clear—they must be worth mints."

"Pearls are hardly quite so fashionable as they were a short while ago," put in the foreman.

"Now where has that man—Garvin—gone off to?" she demanded, unheeding.

"I fear it is out of my power to inform you, madam," he said; "but he is just after giving us instructions to communicate in future with a Miss McElderry, or some such name, at a place called the—The Independency, I believe."

"Oh yes—Anastasia MacElvery, our former housemaid that was," said Mrs. Willester. "I never did like a bone in that girl's skin. Still, I would not have thought that she'd have the audacity——"

Vividly in her mind rose a recollection of her bootless rummaging at Gentian Chalet, and her wrath flared high as she reflected how all the while the jewels which she could have turned to such good account had been stowed away here out of her reach. Even now that she had discovered them the circumstances all seemed to be against her getting possession of them, at any rate with the despatch which alone would serve her purpose.

"Do you identify them as the lady's property, madam?" asked Mr. King.

"Of course. That is, from the description of her necklace I'm perfectly certain that this must be it," said Mrs. Willester. "But I think you had

better let me take charge of it, and show it to her without delay."

She made the proposal with a wildly hopeful vision of herself carrying off the precious leathern case, raising money somewhere immediately on its contents, and hastening to her stockbroker's office, that she might grasp those golden opportunities before they slipped irrevocably away. But the foreman replied firmly :

"Under the circumstances we could not feel ourselves justified in letting it pass out of our hands. Some formal proof of ownership would be required. As you are aware, madam, business is business," he added apologetically, and she saw her vision vanish.

"It will be advisable for me to consult my solicitor on the subject," she said, gathering up some folds of the dignity which had fallen from her in her excitement.

"No doubt that would be the preferable course, madam," said the foreman ; and she thereupon departed. In her own opinion she swept out of the shop, though by more captious critics she might have been said to flounce.

The foreman watched with relief the exit of this sharp-visaged dame, whose air was that of one on the lookout for prey, and whose aspect suggested the unremunerative class of the shabby-genteel, yet who apparently had connections so influential that it would be inexpedient to affront her.

But Mrs. Willester sped along Nassau Street, so absorbed in her own thoughts that she forgot to put up her umbrella against the drizzle, and consequently at every step incurred a risk of prodding from the reckless spokes of other foot-passengers.

Her haste was without any definite purpose, as she had not, so far, seen her way to any line of action. It seemed to her regrettable that Lady Olive was absent at Rostrevor for change of air after bronchitis ; but not that she had the dimmest notion what Lady Olive could have done to help her.

Projects floated in her mind not less desperate than the charging of Nicholas Garvin and Anastasia MacElvery and Mr. Considine and Messrs. Gray & Eberle with theft and fraudulent conspiracy. But these, if ever they emerged from the merest vagueness, became obviously futile. At every turn she was confronted by the fatal impediment to her wishes, in the fact that in no case could the necklace be considered her property.

The unseasonable gloom of the mud-coloured June sky, and the slipperiness of the wet, greasy pavement, seemed further to discourage her as she trudged towards her dingy lodgings, where she found old Mr. Willester more ailing and disconsolate than usual. Despite this, the result of her groping about for a plan was that she grasped a resolve to set off next day and make a raid on the Arfelds at Glenoona, in hopes of possibly raising a loan, failing which she would visit Rath-

kennen, for the chance of by threats or blandishments obtaining from silly Louie Willester the custody of those very desirable jewels.

Indispensable, Mrs. Willester might have called them, so acute by this time had become her need of money. Not only was it required for the additional investments whereby her affluence would be assured, but some of her recently purchased shares were beginning to alarm her by superinducing mysterious "calls," which revealed liabilities of a magnitude underrated, or wholly overlooked, in the glamour of her first essays at fortune-making.

In hardly any circumstances would Mrs. Willester's coming have been hailed with much enthusiasm at the Hall, and it happened now with special inopportuneness so far as her hostess was concerned. Painting and papering operations, and a general cleaning and clearing up, straitened Lady Dorothy in both time and space, added to which she was expecting the arrival of her favourite sister Lady Olive, whose visit would be rather spoiled by her mother-in-law's presence on the scene. And on her mother-in-law, Lady Dorothy felt with chagrin, it would be necessary to bestow the most presentable bedroom, which she had destined for her sister.

Of course it was a very good thing that Mrs. Willester should have a little rest and change after all her devoted nursing of her poor old husband, reflected Lady Dorothy, who habitually made kind assumptions about her acquaintances,



but it would have been a more convenient good thing if she had come some other time. The children, fractious from boredom and want of exercise, resented the appearance of an additional grown-up, who would no doubt still further restrict their liberty of indoor romping.

As for their father, little in the shape of social amenities could be expected from a person whose thoughts were frequently away at the bottom of a monstrous fissure that marred the face of the moon. This was indeed more often than not the case with Henry Arfeld. Week by week the shadow of his grim discovery fell darklier on his mind. At first he hoped that continued investigations might prove him wholly in error.

But this was not to be. On the contrary, what few glimpses were allowed him by the overcast skies terribly confirmed the result of his earlier observations, and showed a state of things growing steadily worse. He spent most of his days shut up in the observatory, working distractedly at wild calculations about the probable date of the approaching cataclysm.

At night ghastly dreams haunted his sleep, recurrent with heightened horror. In one of them he went climbing dizzily down and down the huge, precipitous walls of the fateful crack, till at last came the moment, fearfully foreseen all along, when he descried below him a glimmer of cold light, that widened into awful spaces, when, losing his balance, he would fall, fall towards the abyss, and

waken with a crash. Often he kept himself wearily awake rather than encounter such an experience.

It was no wonder that his mother thought him looking wretchedly harassed and ill. She accounted for this by conjecturing him to be at work on some peculiarly difficult problems, and she consequently put off for a few days any mention of money matters, in hopes that circumstances might then appear more propitious.

During these days Mrs. Willester spent a considerable portion of her superfluous leisure in endeavouring to make herself acquainted with little Minnie Ree, or rather with the child's past history and present position, both of which were veiled by an attractive mystery.

It was not easily to be lifted. Minnie was never talkative, and somehow felt more than usually disinclined to be so when under Mrs. Willester's sharp-cornered eyes.

Elizabeth Cramer, if she had had the best will in the world to be communicative, which was by no means the case, really knew but few facts about her charge. That Miss Minnie certainly belonged to gentlefolks, and had lived much abroad, almost exhausted her knowledge. She considered herself bound not to disclose the terms arranged with Nicholas Garvin, and in reply to her former mistress's questioning merely described Miss Minnie's allowance as sent very regularly through the post, sometimes from one place, and sometimes from another.

For her failure to have learned many particulars from Miss Minnie's conversation she apologised by explaining that the young lady had never made so free with her as to be talking over-much about her own family affairs.

As Mrs. Willester found that, despite all her most insinuating blandishments, the same reserved attitude was maintained towards herself, it seemed as if her curiosity would remain unsatisfied.

In a day or two, however, Lady Olive Nugent arrived, bringing with her much-increased opportunities for gossip.

Not that she was inclined to choose Minnie Ree for the theme of it. The little girl's presence at the Hall somewhat aggrieved her, painful associations making Claude's mother shrink from all topics bearing on that fatal August afternoon, in the events of which Minnie had played no trivial part.

Lady Dorothy's report on the wonderful usefulness of Elizabeth, and the remarkable quietness of Elizabeth's charge, was unresponsively received, and Lady Olive lent a far readier ear to Mrs. Willester's eagerly volunteered intelligence about the pearl necklace.

She began to talk about it after luncheon in the morning-room, where the pleasantness of peat-sods aglow on the grey and chilly damp, kept the three ladies lingering, in spite of the annoyance caused by the parlourmaid's fidgety clearing of the table. Fuel was one of the Arfelds' inherited

economies, and after the first of May a fire kindled in the cold drawing-room grate would have been deemed hardly less portentous than the outbreak suddenly of some fierce volcano: so they drew together on the hearthrug, and conversed with occasional abrupt pauses, rendered discreet by the entrances of Kate Moran.

"By the way," Mrs. Willester said, "I must tell you, Lady Olive, of a discovery I made the other day about your ex-gardener, Nicholas Garvin. I find that he has left some very valuable jewellery at Gray & Eberle's, the Grafton Street people, you know, for sale, I fancy, on commission."

"Oh yes," said Lady Olive, "they wrote to me about it a few weeks ago, and I went to look at it: they are very fine pearls. I meant to tell you of it, but we haven't met since, have we? I thought, indeed, that you might know about it through the young woman MacElvery, who you said was an acquaintance of Garvin's."

"And could you by chance tell me now where this Garvin has gone to?" Mrs. Willester said, unable to refrain from asking the question with a sort of pounce, for she had pinned several hopes to the obtaining of this address.

"Why, I thought you'd have heard," Lady Dorothy interposed. "Mr. Considine has put him in Elizabeth Cramer's place as caretaker at Drumkyle Park. I believe he arrived there on Saturday."

Here a reappearance of Kate Moran postponed comment.

While crumbs were being brushed off the table, Mrs. Willester was considering how far it seemed possible or expedient for her to keep silence on the subject of her own views about the necklace. On the whole she believed that, as touching Anastasia MacElvery, the least said would be the soonest mended; it seemed so desirable that the household at Gentian Chalet should remain in the background, whence ill-considered speech might easily draw them.

But then she was by no means certain whether the two sisters were still ignorant of her step-daughter-in-law's establishment there. Elizabeth Cramer and Nicholas Garvin must have been dangerous sources of awkward information, and if they had divulged the facts, any attempted secrecy on her part might only make them look worse. In that case her wisest course would be to admit them with guarded frankness, thus securing an opportunity for giving them a better face than they would wear if disclosed by some hostile reporter, such as Mr. Considine.

But when the coast had become clear again it was Lady Dorothy who spoke first.

"My own idea about those pearls is that they are to be sold for the benefit of the young person over there," she said, nodding sagely across the room to where, on the floor by a window, Minnie sat oblivious, enveloped psychically in a story-book, and physically in the ample folds of a thick, green-repp curtain.

"I am pretty sure that there has lately been a crisis in her financial affairs. Certainly Elizabeth had some difficulty in getting her provided with a few new garments; and if so her guardians, whoever they are, may very sensibly have decided to turn such things as jewellery to account. It is never likely to be useful in any other way to her, poor child. I wonder——" Lady Dorothy broke off in the middle of her wondering, partly lest she should be overheard, and partly because her mother-in-law was so obviously eager for speech, giving little jerks and clicks, as does the lid of a pot which has begun to boil.

"I assure you, my dear Dorothy, you are entirely mistaken, and it might be most inconvenient if any such notion were put into Gray & Eberle's heads, for as it is they are quite disobliging enough about giving up the necklace. I'm certain it must be mine—my husband's, that is, though it was carried off among Mrs. Hume's things, very unfairly, as she is provided for—otherwise—quite sufficiently; indeed I may say that he has positively impoverished himself on her behalf."

So far Mrs. Willester proceeded glibly, if not lucidly, enough; but then the intricacies of the situation recurred to her mind, making her stumble and grope towards expedient ways of putting things.

Many entanglements indeed spread themselves about her talk. With a view to obtaining a loan from her son it behoved her to represent her circumstances as embarrassed, and yet she must



not "make a poor mouth" over-emphatically, lest doubts should arise of eventual repayment.

Likewise she must beware of the slightest reference to speculations, which she knew to be held in abhorrence at the Hall.

Nor could she prudently go into any avoidable particulars on the subject of that little household in The Half-Square, some correspondence with Mr. Considine having brought home to her the fact that its establishment there, however adroitly managed, was a feat not without ungraceful aspects. Yet she could hardly put forward any claim to the necklace unless she explained why she believed that it had been sent to Dublin by Anastasia MacElvery.

On the whole she was not sorry that the appearance of the post-bag just then interrupted the conversation.

One of the few letters interested everybody. It was from Mr. Considine to Lady Dorothy, announcing his arrival at Drumkyle Park, and asking leave to call next day at the Hall, bringing with him his ward, little Michael Dormer. Mr. Considine wished to consult Lady Olive Nugent about some business matters.

Lady Olive said that it showed very bad taste and great want of consideration on his part, but she supposed he would have to come.

Mrs. Willester resolved that she would have a chill to-morrow, and keep her room till dinner-time, at least.

"He'll hardly be asked to dine, in the circumstances," she thought, the circumstances being partly Lady Olive's dislike, and partly the egregious incapability of the cook, "but if he is, I'll have the things brought up, and poach myself a couple of eggs on toast, for the messes that woman produces are quite uneatable."

Lady Dorothy, with her mind's eye, took a rapid survey of her resources, with the unsatisfactory result that she could see no likelihood of a decent luncheon.

And while these affairs were occupying her elders, the little girl, after some hesitation, slipped out of her corner and over to Lady Dorothy, with an enquiry, whispered aside: Who was Michael Dormer? Had he come away from all his own people too?

"Why, my dear, do you know anybody of that name?" said Lady Dorothy.

"There used to be Michael at home," Minnie said musingly, "before I was taken away. Minette and Michel people called us. But he was going to stay there *for ever*, with all the rest, so I have given up remembering anything about him, except when I forget not to. I did just then, or I might have known that it couldn't be he. It must be another Michael."

"Of course it most likely is," said Lady Dorothy. "In fact somebody said that this child had nobody belonging to him at all. However, you will see him to-morrow. I suppose we shall have to ask

them to luncheon, but I dare say"—hopefully—"they won't come over until later in the afternoon. . . . I wonder whether Mrs. Larminie could make any sort of attempt at cheese cakes."

By this same post, however, Mrs. Cramer received a letter despatched to prevent the meeting of which Lady Dorothy spoke.

Nicholas Garvin wrote in haste, and rather at a loss for any plausible pretext wherewith to justify his prohibition of a meeting between his own ward and Mr. Considine's. He could, on the spur of the moment, devise nothing better to say than that the young gentleman come along with Mr. Considine wasn't Miss Minnie Ree's sort at all, and that it would be no addition or benefit to her to have any doings or dealings with him. So Mrs. Cramer had a right to keep her out of his way for whatever length of time he might be at the Hall.

These statements and injunctions were indeed quite undeservedly disparaging towards poor Master Michael, and Nicholas could only excuse them to himself on reflecting how he had been "put to the pin of his collar for any reasonable raisons, except the truth, that he had no mind to let out." If it wasn't for having to see some loads of coal put in next day he would have stepped over to the Hall himself, and kept an eye on the children, for fear something unhandy might happen. Perhaps he might get done early enough to contrive it yet.

So far as Mrs. Cramer was concerned Nicholas

had little need for uneasiness. Though surprised and slightly shocked at the contents of his letter, she at once decided to take the precautions which he recommended. Knowing nothing about Mr. Considine's companion, save that he was of tender years, she inferred him to be precociously mischievous and unmanageable, no fit associate, indeed, for Miss Minnie, who doubtless were well out of his way.

On the morrow, accordingly, in the course of the forenoon, old Mrs. Cramer received a call from her daughter-in-law's "young lady," escorted by her daughter-in-law herself, and was by the latter led to produce a large, ancient volume of History, sacred and profane, whose many quaint engravings would keep Miss Minnie blissfully absorbed for longer than the visitors at the Hall were likely to stay.

When Elizabeth Cramer had seen the little girl thus happily occupied, back thither she hastened, to resume the cutting-out of a chintz cover for an arm-chair not easily fitted.

The night had been wet, but no rain was now falling, and there were rifts of cold, silvery brightness in the shrouded sky, like a wraith of the summer noon that should have shone there. All the stony surface of the wide road glistened with moisture before her as she went up it, and woodland odours were wafted from the misty groves on either hand, redolent of leaves green and sere, for the air was warm and steamy.

Near the Hall gates she passed a knot of people at the opposite side of the road, gathered about a broken-down wall, which was a suitable height for seats. They pointedly ceased talking as she went by, and nobody replied to her "Fine day," an omission which puzzled her rather unpleasantly.

An explanation, however, came hurrying after her in the shape of Mrs. Theresa Walsh, who overtook her just as she was unlatching the small side-gate. Mrs. Walsh's accost was abrupt to the point of incivility, for with no preliminary greeting, or remarks about the weather, she said :

"Whethen now, yourself's the quare woman to be stoppin' up there."

"What quareness is there in it at all?" said Mrs. Cramer.

"Plenty of bad work there is in it," said Mrs. Walsh.

"Not to my knowledge, ma'am, plenty or scarce," said Mrs. Cramer.

"I dunno what you call drawin' down the heavy floods of the skies in streamin' distruction on folk to ruinate themselves and their bits of land," said Mrs. Walsh, "let alone crumblin' the moon and stars over their heads. And if that's not what some I could name is at, sittin' up all night out in the unnatural little wooden gazebo, there's more than me who's much mistook—and after seein' it with their own eyes. But I wouldn't have thought it of Mr. Henry: not before he went to learn villainy, livin' in London."

"It's the first ever I heard of any such fools' talk," Mrs. Cramer said, not quite truthfully, for a few vague rumours had reached her. "And supposin' the master contrived to get a sight through his long glasses of the sort of bad weather was about comin', I don't see but that he had a right to be givin' word of it beforehand the way he does. Anyhow, that's all he has to say to it."

"Finely destroyed, he has, the whole place on us since ever he come back," Mrs. Walsh said, unconvinced. "No credit to him it is. And I'm takin' Kate out of the kitchen—I am so. I won't have it said agin me that I kep' a child of mine up there, if she was earnin' double wages."

"Oh, so that's why she's after giving warning," said Mrs. Cramer. "Well now, if you asked me, she might do better stoppin' where she is. A middlin' good place it is altogether, and she had a right to keep it, for pickin' another one off the hedge like blackberries *she's* not apt to be."

As Mrs. Cramer was not of a belligerent disposition she permitted herself to lay only a slight stress on the pronoun, and passing rather quickly through the gate, disappeared into a shrubbery beyond the reach of rejoinder.



## CHAPTER XI

### HAILSTONES AND PEARLS

ALMOST before Elizabeth Cramer had got back and taken off her bonnet the sky had begun to lower again, with such a threatening aspect in some quarters that it diminished the likelihood of Mr. Considine's visit.

Lady Dorothy's increased hopes were, however, counterbalanced by another ingredient added to her fear, the apprehension, namely, that the party from Drumkyle might be "caught in a downpour, and kept planted here goodness knows how long!" She thus expressed to Mrs. Willester her hospitable thoughts.

"Oh, you must just get out of it somehow, my dear," Mrs. Willester said unsympathetically, being, at the moment, engrossed by her own schemes.

She had abandoned her intention of having a chill, and now proposed to avoid Mr. Considine by taking refuge in the observatory, where, she said, Henry should give her an astronomical lecture. Some genuine curiosity she had about the heavenly bodies, upon which she assumed her son to be an authority as good, at least, as the best; but

the motive that actually prompted her suggestion was the quest of an opportunity for negotiating a loan. This she expected to find before the end of a duologue with nothing nearer than the stars to interrupt it.

Henry himself, albeit he had no inkling of her designs, anticipated little enjoyment from the interview. Any pleasure that he would once have had in discoursing to her about his hobby was now shatteringly flawed by his constant sense of imminent disaster. An image of that terrible lunar fissure obsessed him, seeming day by day to yawn fearfully wider, and his phantasies were all the wilder because no observations had been possible for weeks past.

Without any enthusiasm he heard his mother at breakfast announce her intention of joining him in the observatory soon after the meal; indeed, only for the unusual dryness of the morning he would have protested promptly:

"Oh, my dear, it wouldn't do for you at all. You might as well walk up a waterfall as that steep path in the kitchen garden."

As it was he left the breakfast-room, his spirits a few degrees lower than usual. Lying in wait for him at the hall-door he encountered Joe Mulcahy, familiar as ex-garden-boy, accompanied by an unknown, small, elderly man, lean, with fluttering grey hair.

"Beg pardon, your Honour," Joe said, with his wonted cheerful grin, "but I thought I might

better be lettin' you know you had a right to look after the little wooden house above in the garden."

"What's wrong with it? The water getting in?" the astronomer enquired, naturally, for his mind had been running on leaks.

"No, sir; liker it is to be goin' on fire," said Joe.

"Well, now," said Henry Arfeld, "I should never have supposed it could be in much danger of that these times—not till it's had a chance of drying itself for a good bit, anyhow."

He glanced round at the quick-dripping shrubs, and the puddles beneath them gleaming greyly in the pale, shifty light.

"Paraffin," said the grey-haired man in a high, husky voice, and began to cough hoarsely.

"Would soon set it in flarin' blazes, wet or dry, your Honour. True for you, Danny Finnegan," said Joe. "And the top of the garden-wall as convenient as anything to be sittin' on and slingin' a canful over the roof."

"But what put it into your head that anybody's likely to do such a thing?" said Henry Arfeld.

"There was talk I heard meself, sir," said Joe, "and there was more that Danny Finnegan heard, by raison of people makin' freer before him than me, who did be employed about the place; only the asthma comes agin him in spakin'. But plenty of it they had, your Honour, and bad talk entirely."

"Ay, had they so, bedad," said Danny Finnegan.

"Wreckin' the brass spy-glass on the stand inside it, that's what they're after, sir," said Joe,

"under the belief that some harm's bound to be happenin' the moon."

"Ah—the moon," Henry Arfeld said, with a start, and an expression of guilt, as if some grave crime had suddenly been brought home to him. "I wonder, now, can Father Kelly, after all——"

"Sorra a word *he* let on, sir," said Joe. "Tellin' you the truth, the first person put the story about was me young miscreant of a brother Murt, that intruded himself by some divilment into the place where your Honour had the discoorse with his Riverence; and not contint with that, must needs be gabbin' to the whole parish about what all he says he heard your Honour tellin' Father Kelly. The wrong end of the story he got hold of, morebetoken, and the one half of it quare on-truths he's after addin' on to it himself.

"Sure now, only the other night I was cloutin' the young vagabond home before me the length of our boreen, by raison of the romancin' he had out of him up at Stephen Garsted's; and he's kep' himself something quieter since then. But tubbe sure that makes no great differ, when all of them's took up with the notion that it's a machine you have there for to be shiverin' the moon in flitters over the fools' heads of them. I'm tired tellin' them that lookin' through it is the most ever your Honour makes an offer at—nothing else'll satisfy them except burnin' down the little house, and smashin' up whatever's in it. Plannin' that a party of them was yesterday after eleven

o'clock mass ; Danny Finnegan himself has reason to know it."

"I have so," Danny Finnegan asserted, with hoarse emphasis.

"No doubt the best thing I can do is to tell the police to keep an eye on it," said Henry Arfeld, who should have known better than to make the remark.

Joe Mulcahy at once felt himself placed in a false position, and his communicativeness ceased on the spot.

That might be according as his Honour considered, he said distantly ; he himself wasn't making any mention of the polis, good or bad. It was nothing to him what they kept their eyes on or off of, only he thought it might be handy for his Honour to get word. Very belike it was all just blathers and nonsense. Anyway, no livin' bein' could suppose or imagine that he'd take upon himself to have doin's or dalin's in the matter with the polis.

Danny Finnegan associated himself with these sentiments by an approving cough, whereupon they both said a rather hurried good-morning.

Henry Arfeld betook himself to the observatory in, on the whole, improved spirits. By the information he had received from Joe Mulcahy he felt enabled to consider himself on some sort of equality with the persecuted pioneers of science, whose discoveries so often incurred the resentment of their unenlightened contemporaries.

The people of Glenoona, he thought, seemed

disposed to make of him a village Galileo or Bruno or—— He could not at the moment recall a third appropriate name, but he had a general sense of joining an illustrious band. In view of the nature of his own particular discovery he could not, indeed, rank as a benefactor of mankind, or look forward to any lasting fame ; still the breath of opposition diverted him from that view, and stirred him to the defence of his achievement.

The effect was agreeably stimulating. It would be expedient, he supposed, to apprise the police, before nightfall, of the threatened outrage ; and with a more cheerful interest than for some weeks past, he set about arranging his untidy papers.

Presently he began to imagine an attack on his premises by a superstitiously infuriated mob, and to devise its incidents as he deemed most advantageous. From the steps of the little wooden shed he was, in fancy, haranguing a large and excited crowd, whose absurd delusions he demolished by a stream of argument enlivened with epigrammatic sarcasm and apposite anecdote, the details of which he could, very conveniently, for the time being omit, when the knock of a real assailant at the door dispersed his dream. Not so completely, it is true, but that even after his mother's arrival he continued to be in a measure preoccupied with the contemplation of his new dignity as persecuted prophet, gave only partial heed to her numerous queries, and answered them very much at random.



This mood was, however, decidedly favourable to her ulterior design, making all the easier a transition from intelligent inquisitiveness about the orbits of the planets, and the eccentricities of comets, which, as she flatteringly reminded him, he had once addressed in an ode as: "Ye fire-tailed tadpoles of the skies," to an avowed anxiety about her own ways and means.

In fact, so absent was he that her wary approaches to the subject, and discreet avoidance of her adventures as a speculator, were really superfluous, and that he first became alive to the drift of the conversation, which he had till then carried on automatically, when she asked him pointblank whether he could supply her with a loan.

The wandering attention, which was all that he had bestowed on her, left him quite unprepared for this request, and he forthwith granted it, assuming that it involved merely a matter of some small change. On learning his mistake he felt himself reluctant to rescind his promise, though he was obliged to make it conditional on his possession of the required sum. He would look through his bank-book, he said, and see how his account stood: he had a misgiving, which he kept to himself, that it was overdrawn.

Thus far they had proceeded, sitting at a little table in one corner of the dimly-lighted shed, when a sudden glare and crash interrupted them. It startled Henry Arfeld for a moment with an impression that it was the violent, probably

explosive, beginning of the menaced attack. But it did actually announce the onset of a thunder-storm, which had been gathering all the morning behind the hills, latterly with muttered groans and a spreading murk, unnoticed by the two unobservant persons shut up in the little wooden house.

Mrs. Willester now declared that she had felt it coming on ever since she awoke ; and her son said that they had better get back into the house before the downpour began. As they hastened along, hailstones were already alighting and obliquely rebounding like petrified grasshoppers ; and at the garden-gate, a vivid flash so startled Mrs. Willester that she jumped into a sheaf of tools, leaned against the wall, and nearly tripped over the rake.

Indoors they found that Mr. Considine's arrival had taken place. The hall was occupied by his ward Michael Dormer, and the young Arfelds, who were displaying no alacrity in their response to their mother's suggestion that they should come and make friends with their little visitor.

Lady Dorothy had conveyed Michael from the drawing-room, partly that her sister might talk business with Mr. Considine undisturbed, and partly that she herself might be at liberty to seek some place of refuge impenetrable by flashes of lightning, which always greatly alarmed her. At the earliest rumble of the storm she had taken fright, and now, as it gloomed and growled, she

would fain have transferred the entertainment of the child to her own Otto, Hal, and Evangeline.

They, however, held frigidly aloof, eyeing the stranger with adverse criticism. His youthful appearance was contemptible, and his staid demeanour told even more against him. No favourable change in their opinion led them to modify this stand-off attitude. The same thunder-peal that had dislodged their father and grandmother gave them an erroneous impression that there was safety in numbers, and drew them out of the corner whence Lady Dorothy's summons had failed to stir them.

Having seen Michael shaken hands with in a civil, if not cordial, manner, she was about to make for the end of a long, dark passage, where she could feign a search through some disorderly book-shelves, when her husband and mother-in-law came in, congratulating themselves on an escape from anything wetter than the hailstones, which were rolling out of garment-folds. Hal arranged them in a pattern on a black square of the chequered stone floor.

Then, espying Michael, Mrs. Willester exclaimed :

" Good gracious, what an extraordinary likeness ! Really it is quite wonderful. Didn't you notice it, Dolly ? "

" Who is like what ? " Lady Dorothy replied rather irritably, for her nerves were all on edge, and she wanted to get away.

" Why, this young gentleman here to little Minnie

what-d'ye-call-her, the child who came with Elizabeth Cramer. I declare if he was a size bigger they might be twins: the very same complexion on them both, and the identical eyes. Look at the way his hair grows, too, just like hers."

"There is a likeness, certainly," said Henry Arfeld. "Hal, mightn't you as well leave off messing with those melting hailstones, and find something to amuse your visitor?"

"I'll show him our tweedle-weedle set," Evangeline said officiously, "and we can have a game here, when you've all gone out of the way. Come along with me, visitor: it's over in this corner."

"Who is so like me?" Michael asked, coming close to her, and looking up at her with great eyes. "I think she did say Minette."

"Oh, she was only talking about Minnie Ree, who belongs to an old workwoman," Evangeline informed him. "They're quite common people, and there's too much made of them, Lizzie Halpin says. We wouldn't be playing with her even if she wasn't away to-day down at old Mrs. Cramer's."

"She doesn't want to be bothered playing with us," Otto said, instinctively entering a protest against his sister's snobbishness; "she's never done reading, and that's all she cares a pin about."

At this hearing Michael's face fell, and he seemingly lapsed into a like state of indifference, with a shade of disappointment superadded.

"Henry," Lady Dorothy paused to call from

the curve of the stairs, "do see that those children don't go to the door, or stand in the windows."

"Nonsense, my dear," said her husband; "the thunder has travelled off now a dozen miles at least, and it's merely raining a little more wildly than usual."

In the drawing-room, meanwhile, the business which Christy Considine had with Lady Olive was quickly talked over, and their conversation turned upon general topics, at first chiefly upon a series of visits to the south of France, whither he had been summoned repeatedly during the past spring by the long-continued illness of an old Mrs. Dormer.

He dwelt upon the affairs of this old lady and her daughter at a length which might have seemed excessive, considering that his hearer was not acquainted with them; and he then, as it were incidentally, mentioned his having met a Miss Hall, Miss Elsie Hall, who had been also staying at Hyères, as companion to an invalid lady. He believed—he knew—that Lady Olive was a friend of Miss Hall's; in fact Miss Hall had entrusted him with a letter for Lady Olive, not being sure of her address.

At the sound of Elsie Hall's name many painful memories awoke in Lady Olive's mind, among the most alert of them being a recollection that Elsie's last letter still remained unanswered, and this although she was well known by her correspondent to have fallen on somewhat difficult and

evil days, when the defection of a friend seems an ominous unkindness.

Had it not been for this twinge of remorse Lady Olive would not have failed to note something at once flurried and hesitating in Mr. Considine's manner of executing Miss Hall's commission—something inconsistent with his wonted self-possessed advance along a forthright path. As it was the symptoms were lost upon her, so that when, at his suggestion, she opened and read the letter, the contents gave her an unmitigated shock of surprise.

Elsie Hall announced her engagement to Christopher Considine. That much was perfectly clear, although Lady Olive had to read the letter through twice before she quite grasped the fact. Evidently the wooing had been done with expedition, and completed after an acquaintanceship of only a few months' standing at most.

But this hardly counted as a cause of Lady Olive's amazement, which sprang from one main source, the fact that Elsie was going to marry, had already forgotten Claude and last August's tragedy. Or could it be, Claude's mother wondered, re-reading the letter, that Elsie had really never cared for him, nor even guessed his feelings towards her? It was said that women always knew; but, if so, how could she have written the last paragraph?

"I can't help wishing," it ran, "that dear old Claude knew about this, for he would have been so delighted. He always did hate the idea



of my having to earn my own livelihood ; indeed, he was sometimes quite cast down about it. And oh, dear Lady Olive, if only you and he were still together at Drumkyle ! I could think of nothing else to wish for : my happiness would be really perfect. . . .”

Thoughts came thick and fast to Lady Olive during the few minutes which she spent in meditation on what she had so unexpectedly read.

First of all she commented bitterly to herself on diversity in points of view, seeing that the event which had shattered her own life was merely a trivial flaw in her friend's radiant bliss. For Elsie's letter, though it did close on a note of regret, had been throughout a pæan of rejoicing. Then suddenly she recollected that Elsie would now, after all, be mistress at Drumkyle.

That Elsie, whose sincerity was undoubted, saw in the circumstance merely a drawback to her felicity, did not diminish Lady Olive's resentment. Neither could she perceive an even-handed justice, or anything except a freakish spite, in the turn of affairs which had made her own endeavours to exclude Elsie from that position the very means of placing her there. If she and Claude had spent that last afternoon together the tragedy by reason of which Christopher Considine had stepped into his young kinsman's shoes would never have been enacted.

Probably, indeed, the thing against which she had schemed would have come to pass. In her

heart of hearts Lady Olive could not bring herself really to believe that her Claude would have been unsuccessful as a declared lover, and she still was firmly convinced of his attachment. On discovering its existence, quite unlooked-for and undreamed of, surely, by a girl so slenderly endowed with worldly advantages as Elsie Hall, she would doubtless have speedily made the further discovery that her own feelings, which need no longer be suppressed or miscalled, did, in truth, go much beyond just friendliness.

Yet, supposing all this, what a heaven upon earth it would seem, Lady Olive thought, to have her son still here, even though it were, not with Elsie, but with the very least eligible of the very most ineligible to make the best of as a daughter-in-law.

Meditating thus, poor Lady Olive sat on an uncomfortably sloped sofa, and looked off her letter out across the murk-canopied fields, where flashes from the receding storm flickered among the grey, smooth-combed strands of the rain, which thickened the air with a rentless weft. She had forgotten that Mr. Considine was waiting all the while, discreetly turning over the unseen pages of an illustrated volume, and thinking what a very long letter Elsie must have written to Lady Olive.

By-and-by, however, she recollected herself, and hastened to offer him the orthodox congratulations, speaking in most cordial terms of his fiancée, to whom she would write at once.

"Indeed I have been a terribly bad correspondent of late," she said, "but Elsie will forgive me, I'm sure, knowing how unsettled I was all through the winter—and am still, in fact," she added, careful to prevent any possible suggestion that the wedding should take place under her auspices.

With relief she learned that it would be abroad, and a very quiet affair, as soon as old Mrs. Pollard had secured a successor to Elsie. In Mr. Considine's opinion Mrs. Pollard was, evidently, much to be pitied for the loss of such companionship, howsoever undeservedly enjoyed; and, as all his views were variations on the same theme his hearer, not ardently sympathetic, soon found it tending towards monotony.

Welcome enough, accordingly, was an interruption which presently occurred in the shape of thunder and lightning fiercely renewed, as the storm drifted back to them again over the blurred hills, glowering and glaring, while the whole countryside lay with all its sounds hushed in awe-stricken expectancy between reverberate peal and peal.

Gradually the gregarious instinct, which so often wakens in creatures confronted by the great brute forces of nature, drew the house's occupants together, till before long they were all assembled in the large, many-recessed hall.

Even Mrs. Willester, despite her wish to avoid her outspoken correspondent Mr. Considine, joined the party at last, slipping unobtrusively into the darkest corner. Its obscurity already contained

the three young Arfelds, driven thither by undissembled alarm, and their mother, whose presence was ostensibly for the purpose of encouraging and consoling.

Little Michael Dormer, on the contrary, showed no perturbation, but watched with pleased interest the thick-coming flashes, as they lit up the sombre interior, and reflected themselves luridly in the ample pools on the gravel outside.

His guardian accounted for this equanimity by supposing that he was used to much worse thunderstorms in Italy, a remark at which Mrs. Willester pricked up her ears, for had not Elizabeth Cramer said that the other foreign-looking child, Minnie, with her curious likeness to this dark-eyed, small boy, also came from abroad? and, if so, why not from Italy?

To trace an additional thread of connection between these two children would now be all the more interesting because it would make a third, counting first their resemblance, and secondly their acquaintance with that man, Nicholas Garvin. Really, Mrs. Willester thought it was, to say the least of it, a most singular coincidence that he should be nominally the guardian of one child, and at the same time in the employment of the avowed guardian of the other.

Again, and this seemed much more urgently important to Mrs. Willester's mind, there was Garvin's action in the mysterious matter of the pearl necklace. By this time she had firmly convinced

herself that neither he nor Anastasia MacElvery was the real principal in the affair. Nor could she entertain the notion that her step-daughter-in-law was concerned in it, at any rate as a free agent.

What she did surmise was that Mr. Christopher Considine, the boorish writer of certain rude and disagreeable letters, had taken advantage of his position at The Independency to demand from poor Mrs. Hume, whose incapacity for business nobody could fail to perceive, payment on account of house-rents, or some such pretext, and had terrorised her into an attempted sale of her remaining possessions as a means of raising money wherewith to satisfy his iniquitous claims.

For the sake of appearances, indeed, the nefarious transaction was being carried on in the names of Nicholas Garvin and Anastasia MacElvery, a simple and natural expedient in the circumstances, Mrs. Willester considered, and the proceeds would, of course, be handed over to the hatcher of the plot. Perhaps even now the sale had been effected, and a piece of property which she had come, by an involved process of reasoning, to regard as rightfully her own, was irrevocably alienated—in the hour, she pathetically phrased it, of her sorest need.

Since her arrival at the Hall, that string of pearls, with its sparkling pendant, had been more than ever an object to her of covetous longing, because she had taken note of various familiar domestic signs betokening, as she well knew, a scarcity

of ready money in the household, unfavourable to her prospect of effecting the prompt loan, which only could serve her purpose. Henry Arfeld's conditional promise but slightly raised her hopes; she thought it even more probable than he did that his bank-account was over-drawn. To acquire the necklace hence grew yet plainlier the nearest way.

As they hurried back to the house from the observatory through the hail shower, her first thought at sight of those vaulting white beads had been of those other ones glistening quietly in their velvet-lined case. And when she slipped furtively into the dusky hall, where she espied a tall stranger standing between her and the streaming, flickering window, it was as a receiver of stolen goods that she recognised her discourteous correspondent.

So now, Mr. Considine's remark about the violence of Italian storms having, in the first place, started her on speculations as to the antecedents of the unknown children, next reminded her of a story, not long since read, relating how a callous criminal was scared by thunder and lightning into a confession of his manifold misdeeds.

A personal application of the anecdote speedily followed. Why should not something similar happen in the case of Mr. Considine? Suppose she were to step forward, amid the rolling echoes of some terrific peal, and confront him with a recital of the enormities which, little as he might have thought it, had come to her knowledge. Quite possibly, the moment being judiciously chosen,



most satisfactory results would ensue and accrue—restitution of the jewels, perhaps, or, more acceptable still, of the price unrighteously obtained for them.

The project commended itself to a mind traversed by a flighty and fantastic streak, which had made it a household word among her children that you never could tell *what* mother might take it into her head to do next. In fact she sat for some minutes contemplating the feasibility of this agreeable psychological experiment, and the chances are that she would have tried it, had not a new arrival just then opportunely intervened.

It was Nicholas Garvin who made his appearance, dimly perceived to be dripping, amid one of the darkest and wildest flurries of the storm. Weather more unchancy would have been needed to deter him from the expedition, so keen was his anxiety about the risk of a meeting between Miss Minette and Master Michael, and so strong his wish to see the little girl himself.

His own account of his coming was given with less constraint than he would usually have felt in the presence of quality, the extraordinary liberties taken by the elements, which had driven him here, to bolt in headforemost at the nearest entrance, "without with your leave or by your leave," having apparently broken down other social barriers as well.

"To be sure now, I hadn't much more expectation I'd get to be gettin' over here this day than if

it was to the Land of Egypt and back agin, wid them loads of coal comin' as unhandy as the wrong end of a rapin'-hook. Howsomer, by good luck they weren't more than a thrifle late, and the notion riz in me head to be tellin' the lads that come along wid the carts that there was early closin' in it to-day, on account of a big buryin' goin' through, wid the best part of the people follyin', to Kilmarooney; and unless they got done wid puttin' in the coal agin twelve o'clock, sorra a sup of drink would they find in Glenoona to be spendin' their fourpences on.

"So after that 'twas the great weather me gintlemen made of the business entirely, throwin' in the loads. Bejabers, you might have said it was Noah's Ark they were coalin', and the Flood weltherin' up to be swallyin' the sacks. And as soon as they jigg'd away wid themselves, off I set, nor any great while to spake of after your Honour I'd be, if I got e'er a chance of a lift, but ne'er a one did I, for very belike the few slams of thunder there was in it kep' the people off the road. Faix now, right enough they were, for about half-ways it began again hammer and tongs, and the rain this minyit's slappin' down like parin's off a wave of the say. A good job it is, sir, that none of yous is out under such quare ould deluges."

As he spoke Nicholas sent cautious glances round him, half hoping and half dreading to see Miss Dormer ensconced in some recess, safely protected from the weather, though exposed to perilous

recognition. It would be imprudent, he thought, to make any direct enquiries about her himself.

He felt considerably relieved when, to a question of Lady Olive's, Lady Dorothy replied that little Minnie Ree had gone, before the storm began, to see old Mrs. Cramer, and that Elizabeth Cramer had set off during the short lull to fetch her back.

"But of course," Lady Dorothy added with a jump, as the lightning blazed into her eyes, "they won't dream of stirring—as long as this dreadful *thing* is going on, and it doesn't seem a bit likely to stop."

Nicholas looked out on the lowering rain-scape, and replied serenely :

"Indeed, your ladyship, it might be very apt now to keep at the polthogues for a long while."

He was well satisfied that it should be so, for, in his view, the downpour had somewhat the properties of those shrouding mists wherein ancient Greek heroes were wont to vanish, rapt from the fray by their partial patron goddesses. It bid fair to detain his Miss Dormer, safely weather-bound, until these dangerous visitors had departed.

"More power to your elbow, good man!" he said to himself, as a protracted roar rolled away. "Divil a doubt there's in it but that if she and Master Michael come within sight and recollection of each other, and Mr. Considine found out the contrivance I had about her, off he'd send her back to the ould lady and Miss Beatrice, before

we could look round. And then goodness might help her among all them nuns and priests, with their high walls and little windows, and their reckonin' up prayers and penances, and sins and saints, till they have the head of you moidhered and the heart of you tired for want of anythin' a trifle plisant and sinsible. Tormented out of her the life 'ud be in next to no time. But she's right enough now—it's quare if I can't keep them asunder. Musha, between one thing and another, it's a strange world we're wanderin' through, and the strangest part of it does be the foolishness of them that had a right to have more wit."

From these reflections he turned contentedly to entertain Master Michael and the young Arfelds with such feats of dexterity in carving various devices on a sheaf of walking-sticks that their interest was quite diverted from the storm, and that Michael Dormer witnessed, disapprovingly surprised, more than one scuffling, fraternal squabble between Otto and Hal about the ownership of some particularly admired specimen of the craftsman's handiwork.

Their father and Christopher Considine by-and-by splashed out in waterproofs to see how the observatory was faring. As they found that the roof had sprung a leak, and as Henry Arfeld did not let slip the opportunity for telling his companion all about his ominous discovery, they were slow to return.

Seeing them go, Mrs. Willester bethought her

of an action whereby she might profitably employ their absence.

By Nicholas Garvin's arrival she had been baulked of her meditated attack on Mr. Considine, but it now struck her that she might, with advantage, assail Nicholas himself. Forth from her corner, thereupon, she stepped, short and spare of figure, domestically dowdy in a baggy black cloth body and a rusty net cap, scantily covering the thinness of tightly-strained, sandyish hair.

"I should be glad," Nicholas heard an unfamiliar, high-pitched voice saying close by, "if you will explain how you come to be offering for sale, at a Dublin jeweller's, a very valuable ornament, the property of my husband and myself."

Glancing up from a half-whittled oak-leaf, Nicholas at once recognised the acute-angled eyes, over-closely set together, and observed to himself :

"Aye, bedad, herself is the widow woman that was in it up at her ladyship's, and as like to what Anastasia MacElvery tould me as the two blades of the one pair of scissors."

Then aloud, with an air of concern :

"True for you, ma'am ; but sure now, cliver and clane, I disremembered you ever biddin' me call about it."

"Most certainly I never did," Mrs. Willester declared, taken aback by the effrontery of this unexpectedly assumed attitude on Nicholas's part—"never in my life. I know nothing about you.

The removal of the necklace from Mrs. Hume's house was downright robbery, whoever your accomplices were—a scandalous proceeding of everybody concerned.”

Nicholas appeared to ponder this charge gravely for a few moments, but very soon his countenance cleared into the happy expression of one who has seen light thrown on a perplexing puzzle.

“Why then, ma'am, them beads you were after gettin' a look at up in the shop there wouldn't be your ones at all, but just the moral of them; that was the way of it, you may depend. Sure, aisy enough you might be mistook, and you very belike, ma'am, wid half a dozen or so of the same sort lyin' around at home, the way you wouldn't think to notice every little taste of a differ there was between them, as a body might that owned only the one string, and had it by heart the same as an ould rosary. And as you was sayin' yourself, ma'am, what call would you have to be sellin' of your jewels, or havin' any doin's or dalin's wid them thieves of shopmen, unless it was buyin' some new conthraptions off them?”

Too much incensed for more direct communication with this shamelessly impudent orator, Mrs. Willester, turning towards her daughter-in-law, was beginning a wrathful protest; but at the same moment Elizabeth Cramer rushed through the back door into the hall, dripping, dishevelled, distraught of mien, and bearing a tale of woe.

“Oh, melady, what will I do at all? They're



after losin' Miss Minnie on me down below there !  
High nor low can I find a hair of her head. And  
what's to become of her, and she out under the  
teems of rain—and the thunder and lightnin'—  
and the river ragin' mad ? ”

## CHAPTER XII

### OLD JOANNA'S ERRAND

WHAT had become of Miss Minnie was this: For half an hour after Elizabeth Cramer had left her she occupied herself very happily with the queer, black woodcuts in the heavy, leather-bound volume, and would have continued to do so for an indefinite length of time if she had remained uninterrupted; but this was not to be. Before long old Mrs. Cramer, hearing a rumble of distant thunder, rose from her hearth-side armchair and retreated into her bedroom, there to fortify her mind, in case of a dreaded storm, by reading some reassuring passages of Scripture. Oft-repeated perusal had taught her to turn these up with practised expedition, never stumbling inauspiciously on texts of an opposite tendency. She was quite unaware that her movement had been watched and waited for by a pair of red-rimmed eyes, stationed in a peering-place outside the diamond-paned window. But such was the fact.

Scarcely had the inner door closed behind her, when the outer doorway was filled by the low,

wide figure of old Joanna Garsted, enveloped in her enormous black cloak. The tapping of her stick on the floor caused Minnie to look up and perceive, ill-pleased, the unwelcome visitor, who drew near with the intermittent and disconcerting swiftness of an insect.

Minnie witnessed her approach with dismay. On this occasion, however, she did not attempt any detestable pawing, but made haste to deliver a message :

" 'Twas Lizzie Cramer, honey, bid me be tellin' you she's waitin' for you outside there. Comin' on to rain again she thought it was, so she says you had a right to be goin' along home wid her, before it gets too bad altogether. And biddin' you make haste she was, me jewel."

Obeying this injunction with all the more alacrity because it seemed to be the only means of escape from the old woman's presence, Minnie quickly put on her hat, and followed Joanna out of doors.

Elizabeth Cramer was nowhere to be seen, but Joanna, explaining that she had gone a few steps down the boreen to visit a sick body in the next cabin, led the way thither. Arrived there, she vanished through the black door, having warned Minnie to stop out in the air, lest they might be bad with the fever.

When she emerged she reported that Elizabeth was another bit further down the road talking to some friends of hers, who were bringing out a

child to be christened, and she again took the lead.

This high-banked lane, narrow and deep-rutted, ran, with many windings, downhill to the river. At every turn Minnie hoped to come in sight of Mrs. Cramer, and as often was disappointed. No live creatures were shut in between the steep banks except two or three tethered, browsing goats. At last she ventured to pull old Joanna by the cloak, and suggest that they should turn back.

"For if Mrs. Cramer was anywhere," she said, "we couldn't have come all these miles without seeing her." But old Joanna would not hear of doing so.

"Ragin' mad, and sittin' waitin' for us in distraction Lizzie Cramer 'd be," she said, "and we not comin' next or nigh her. Is it turnin' back you'd be, wid herself, yonder, not so much as a couple of perches from us? And she after layin' twenty-seven charges on me to be bringin' you to her, if trampin' the longest road ever drew crooked on the face of Ireland we were itself. Sure, along by the water we'll find her now, that's flowin' before our feet, and the pity of the world you to be talkin' foolish and delayin' us."

They had come, by this time, to the place where the boreen reached the margin of the river, and ceased to exist, save as a faintly-marked track branching off on either hand, often encroached upon by loops of the over-brimming stream.

The Oona River, which generally ripples briskly

past, brownly transparent, and dancing with liquid lights, now looked rather like a strip of ploughed land gone mad. Its waters, muddily turbid, slid on in solid slabs and ridges, shaken from below as if by an incessant earthquake. Their sound was a ponderous lumbering, mixed with murmurs and sighs. As the old woman and child neared its edge they felt the ground tremble beneath their feet, as a bog quivers at the passage of a cart or car.

Just then the long-threatened storm broke on them with a leaping flare and a protracted peal. Soon the hailstones of the same shower, which at that moment was pelting Mrs. Willester and her son up in the Hall garden, dashed into their faces, and drove them to shelter themselves under the lee of a tall furze-bush.

But here, at the bottom of the valley, the thunder-cloud was slower to lift, nor were there any signs of that pause in the storm, which came higher up on hill-slopes. After waiting for what seemed to her an interminable period, Minnie once more spoke of going home.

"Mrs. Cramer isn't anywhere," she said, "and the water's running at us all round. I'm sure she'd rather I came back, and I don't see what's the use of staying here."

Though her wishes had grown stronger she expressed them more diffidently than before, feeling herself less able to dispense with old Joanna's assistance in getting home. The wild weather

scared her, and she had grave misgivings as to whether she could find her way. A gust of wind had twitched off her hat to toss on the swirling stream, a mishap which somehow made it seem even more impossible to face the journey alone.

On the other hand old Joanna, as if understanding this, adopted a changed tone, no longer persuasive at all, but indignant and peremptory. Not a word would she listen to about turning back. A fine fool she'd be to come trapesing that far for no better reason. If a bold little girl had her mind set on racing home whenever she took the notion into her head, let her know that she had a good step further to go before there'd be any talk of it!

"And was it what use is there to be stoppin' a while here? Troth and bedad, me lass, use there'll be in it, and plinty of use, as soon as the flurry of the ugly shower's past over a bit, the way we can get to take off agin up along yonder by the river as far as to the meetin' waters. That's the place where we will be lavin' it, wid the help of God."

As she spoke, she drew from under her cloak a small bundle that seemed to be nearly all wrappings on wrappings of worn-looking, discoloured newspapers and nondescript rags. After much unrolling, the core of these was seen to be a lump of black, peaty mould, which bore a very rude resemblance to a human figure, about six inches in height. Some unintelligible characters were scrawled on it,



and a cord was tied loosely round what might be considered its waist.

Old Joanna surveyed it with satisfaction, and held it out to Minnie.

"Look you at that, me dear," she said, "but you needn't offer to be layin' a finger on it yet a while."

Minnie was inclined rather to shrink away from the uncouth little object than to touch it; she looked at it, silently puzzled.

"What, now, would you say it was?" the old woman demanded triumphantly. "Sorra aught else is it, let me tell you, but the livin' death-image of cursed young Henry Arfeld above yonder, himself that's after bringin' ruination on the parish and the people, wid his makin' and meddlin' and setting' up to be interferin' wid the moon and the stars in the sky, till he has God Almighty that stirred up agin us, as apt He is as not to take and sling an odd few of thim fiery ones out of His hand down on the top of us all, like a gossoon droppin' of gravel-stones for divilment into a wasps' nest. And where'll we be thin?"

"Aye bedad, and sure this instant of time there's the one half of the countryside lyin' under water be raison of the rain and the floods comin' continual all along of the young miscreant meddlin' wid what he had a right to be lettin' alone. . . . Drownded cliver and clane he has every clod of me poor sither's son's bit of land; sailin' boats on it you might be, and his thranyeens of crops destroyed, and his couple of head of bastes starvin' the same as the

childer. Cryin' wid the hunger yisterday I seen little Larry, and I wid ne'er an earthly iotum to be givin' the crathur, for the little ould black hin of me own, that did be layin' an egg now and agin, went off down the river on me the other night, swep' away in the plank shed, and she roostin' ever high up over the door, as wary as a Christian, to thry keep herself out of raich of the water, if she got e'er a chance.

"But it's the short while longer the miscreant 'll be at his tricks, me good man," old Joanna continued, suddenly addressing herself to the grotesquely fashioned piece of earth, "when wunst I have you rightly settled where the running' of two strames'll keep racin' by you night and day, and you fixed firm between a couple of stones, till the limbs are melted off of you in the flowing water, shape nor size left on you, bedad, that are the livin' death-image of young Arfeld the villain. For then it's wastin' off him the flesh 'll be the very same way, and the stren'th quittin' out of him; and when the stone that's in the middle of you takes and drops down to the river's bottom, that same minyet is the sowl of him bound to drop down into the Ould One's own place. And sure 'tis plased he may be, and they roastin' him red-hot, to remimber the poor people he had starved and drowned, wid the destruction he done on Glenoona."

She paused for a moment, contemplating the figure with much complacency.

"An innicent hand," she said, turning to

Minnie, "must be puttin' it in the water, and fastenin' the cord, or 'twill come to no good, so that's why I thought to take a child along wid me, and a fairy child, accordin' to your own sayin', that's true enough very belike, if more than me wasn't mistook in the quare, outlandish look on you.

"But a dacint, quiet child, all the same," old Joanna proceeded, with a tinge of its former wheedling in her tone, "that's comin' on now widout any talkin' and delayin'. Time it is for us to be settin' off wid ourselves, thunder or no thunder, polthogues or no polthogues, if we're to get home agin dark."

Carefully rewrapping the image, she stowed it away under her cloak, and with many gaspings and groanings stooped to pick up her stick, which she had leaned against the shed-wall, but which had fallen on the ground.

"Be throttin' on along wid me, alanna," she said, when she had recovered it.

As Minnie thought apprehensively that the crooked, claw-like hand showed a tendency to clutch hold of her she judged it advisable to move on, keeping well beyond reach.

Very loth she was to start on this errand, the purpose of which she in no degree understood. The only crumb of comfort that she could find in the fearful old crone's unintelligible utterances was contained in those last words, implying that they were eventually to return home. Thus, cowed and bewildered, and clinging to but a vague hope, she followed her unchancy companion.

Hissing sheets of rain, which had now superseded the hail, spread white patterns on the murky surface of the water, glaring into strong relief ever and anon, when flashes flickered across it.

Their route, prescribed by old Joanna, was as close as possible to the river, though not seldom they were obliged, by the depth of the overflowed pools, to make a wide detour; through the shallower ones she trod without concern. Her hobbling gait was so swift that Minnie could hardly keep up with its pace.

Towards the head of the glen the river's banks rose higher and steeper, in some places offering the choice between an elevated path and a narrow strip at their foot, level with the stream. Always old Joanna chose this if it were by any means practicable, though waves often washed over it perilously, so that Minnie was in danger of being taken off her feet. Wilder and whiter grew the waters; the sound of their hollow, trampling rush muffled the roar of the thunder; the air, stirred into wafts by their onset, was dank and chilly with spray.

At last they came to a place where the river was pent between precipitous cliffs, and the travellers' way barred save for a shingly belt skirting the base of the huge crag-wall. Here the old woman stood still, and pointing on ahead with her stick said:

"We're just there now; we'll come to it before we turn the corner, that's scarce a step."

Minnie, however, found it a long and painful step, as she stumbled over the large, round stones, that were slippery with wet, and wobbled beneath her uncertain tread, while the noises of the torrent, so terrifyingly near, seemed to have seethed into her head, making it confused and dizzy. Twice or thrice she fell, and she could not have struggled on at all had she not grasped the long ivy-trails which hung straight down the face of the rock at her right hand, like strips of coarsely woven tapestry.

From this cliff a small promontory jutted at right angles. It was composed of one enormous boulder, partially covered with grassy soil, and joined to the rock-wall by a low neck of piled-up shingle. On the boulder's flat top there was room for a furze-bush and three or four persons.

"That's it," old Joanna called back again over her shoulder; "at t'other side of it we're apt to find a handy stone, or a branch to be fastenin' the cord round."

With remarkable agility she scrambled and clattered along the little causeway, and up to the crowning furze-bush, by which she stood beckoning and calling impatiently to Minnie, who followed her less nimbly.

On the further side of the big boulder ledges of turf and rock led easily down to the wild waters, which broke into weltering foam among several smaller boulders, whose heads still emerged, be-wigged with fleeces of palest sea-green moss.

"Betwixt them two near ones you can be raichin' to fix it, me honey," said old Joanna.

But before they could begin to descend, suddenly, from the opposite bank, came a vast gurgling moan, mingled with sounds of crashing and rending, and they saw the crest of the highest cliff, all a dark peat-mass, sway and lurch to and fro, as if rocked by an earthquake. Then, in a moment, it had plunged forward appallingly from its stone pedestal, and lay heaped in the river's channel, which it half blocked up, leaving behind it a cavernous chasm, bounded by rugged black walls, veined with white skeletons of embedded tree-trunks and branches.

Almost simultaneously there burst forth in its wake, as if at the throwing open of a door, foam-blanced, a swift, prone torrent, which fell hardly less heavily than the cliff. These were the waters drained from the wet mountain-bog above, and for weeks past gathering here in a hollow, till, aided perhaps by the shattering thunder-peals, they had broken through the barrier, and hurled themselves into the flood beneath.

To the old woman and child, on their scanty standing-ground, the result was the swoop-down on them of a muddy, solid-looking water-ridge, that reared itself up above them, and came very near sweeping them away with it as it rolled over and past them, drenched and half-smothered. Only her desperate grasp of the furze-bush's wrenched-at stem saved Minnie, and old Joanna,



flung on her knees, would have been irresistibly haled along had not her stick, wedged in a crevice of the rock, given her a just sufficient hold.

Yet though they had, for that moment, escaped the worst, their plight was one of extreme peril. Their little promontory had been turned into an islet, round which fierce currents clashed, tearing off its covering of sward in black-lined strips, and rising rapidly higher. Already the small boulders were hidden; yards of turbulent water now separated it from the strand, which had shrunk to a mere thread below the ivy-hung cliffs, and a stone's throw further up-stream, where the bog-slide had partially blocked the channel of the confluent Oona and Ardowen rivers, those pent-in forces were pressing ever harder and harder against the ineffectual dam, whose ruins they would ere long over-leap.

Even in these grievous straits old Joanna did not brook to abandon her scheme of vengeance. Drawing forth her ragged bundle, now stained and dripping, she unwrapped the death-image and contrived to push it towards Minnie, who crouched, clinging to the half-uprooted furze-bush.

"Catch a hold of it, there's me jewel," she said, "and be slingin' it in the water in the name of God. That might do some good yet, for all it's not the right way. Arrah now, you little torment! Bad luck to you! can't you be catchin' a grip of it, while it's widin your raich?"

But, in her terror, Minnie neither heeded nor

heard, and the lump of black earth went rolling past her, till it dropped down on to an inaccessible ledge, where it lay crumbled into shapeless fragments. Its owner looked on with wrathful despair, as if she were watching some mystic symbol of inestimable worth go hopelessly to loss. Then she shook and tugged at her stick, trying vainly to wrest it free; her scowl at Minnie betokened no friendly intent.

While she was occupied thus, a large, snapt-off bough, drifting by, entangled its topmost twigs in her flapping cloak, and nearly dragged her down backwards, giving her a fright which set her muttering prayers in place of maledictions. Deaf to both, the maddened river billowed along, smoothing a way for itself with tyrannous speed over all obstacles, one by one submerged, and whirling in spirals that mounted ever higher and higher around the dwindled boulder. Soon nothing would mark its site except an eddy in the fleeting foam.

At this time, however, somebody was abroad, bound on what seemed a very forlorn hope of rescuing little Minnie Ree.

Nicholas Garvin had barely waited to hear the story Elizabeth Cramer told on returning to the Hall: How at her mother-in-law's house she found that Miss Minnie had mysteriously disappeared, whereupon she immediately set about making enquiries in the vicinity; how two or three people had seen the child along with old Joanna Garsted

just outside the Cramers' gate, but that was all; and how visits to several of the neighbours had elicited no further information.

Everybody was keeping under cover on account of the storm, and "sight nor light" of the old woman and little girl had anybody beheld. The only certain fact was that both of them were missing. And how at last Elizabeth had hurried back, in hopes of getting advice and assistance from the Arfelds.

"For only wastin' time I was, running about at random, like a pea spilt on the floor, wid ne'er a notion where to be looking for her. But heart-scalded I am, melady, wonderin' what's took her at all, or what call old Joanna Garsted has to be streelin' her about, and she one that Miss Minnie had a sort of misliking for, I well know. And the pours of rain run through with the lightning, fit to scare anybody, let alone every little stream about the place flowing over all before it in a flood—that's what I do be thinkin' bad of, for old Joanna's astray in her mind, and you couldn't tell where she might take it into her head to go wandering off to, along with poor Miss Minnie. And it going on for six o'clock." .

Thus far Nicholas, lacking any better source of information, had constrained himself to listen, but at this point his patience failed, so that, uttering some terse comments on the vagaries of womenkind in general, and mischievous old hags in particular, he bolted out of the house, hot-foot to begin a

quest for Miss Dormer, which his ignorance of the country round made all the more haphazard.

It was less by good guidance than good luck that he proceeded straight to the Cramers' house, where he arrived just when old Mrs. Cramer was learning from a neighbour that her little Paudeen had mentioned, with the casual irrelevance of extreme youth, having seen old Joanna Garsted "half-ways down the boreen, going towards the river, before the rain began, and a strange girl with her."

Paudeen apparently had noticed nothing about this girl except "a blue string hanging out of her hat," which was, Mrs. Cramer said, "Miss Minnie sure enough; and morebetoken ne'er another strange young lady is there staying in the place, unless Miss Evangeline above at the Hall; but her it couldn't be."

"He hadn't the wit," Paudeen's mother said apologetically, "to tell us sooner, or else keepin' a look-out we might be for the bodies floatin' down, for drowneded they are, as sure as I'm standin' on me two feet, if they went widin an ass's bray of the river, that's risin' itself up and spreadin' itself out the way you couldn't say, from one minyit to the next, would you be walkin' on land or water. What chance have they, wid the ould crathur none too sinsible in her mind?"

Not a moment did Nicholas wait to calculate this chance. He was off down the lane before Mrs. Linders had quite finished speaking.

"Whoever he may be at all," Mrs. Cramer remarked, watching him through the window, "he's in a fine taking about little Miss Minnie, and quare and soople in his limbs. Sure, he bounced in on us here only just this minyit, as suddint as a grasshopper ; and now there he is agin, leppin' along through the deep mud like a thing on wires."

On the margin of the Oona River Nicholas paused for a short while, smitten with dismay at its menacing aspect. It had risen rapidly ever since the passage of the pair for whom he was seeking, and now in many places the path they had taken lay under deep water. Tossing foam and furiously contorted currents appeared to him as a more or less indefinite threat of disaster, but the special sign of woe, a hat "with blue strings out of it," floating away among them was not visible, save to his mind's foreboding eye.

After standing still for a few minutes, in meditations which produced no satisfactory results, he bethought him of looking into the adjacent shed, where Miss Minnie had indeed taken shelter not very long before. A faint gleam of hope was extinguished by the emptiness which he found there, but as he came away he espied, lying near the threshold, and picked up, a small, white cotton glove. This he made sure was a sign that he had come upon her track. As he straightened out the muddy little fingers he remembered, with a sense of dissatisfaction quite inappropriate to the cir-

cumstances, that "in her own place it was silk or kid Miss Dormer did be wearing." Then he recollected himself, and began to walk on up-stream.

"In a convent," he mused, with reproachful bitterness, "they wouldn't, very belike, have let her go to loss by raison of a crazy ould bedlamite bewitching her out to get drowned among the raging floods; whatever else they done, they wouldn't do that. But you couldn't tell they mightn't be at something no better, or worse. 'Twas according to the best of me judgment, anyway. And much differ that 'ill make, if it's in there I'm after landing her."

"There" was the Oona River, roaring on his left hand. The storm had abated, and looking across the water he saw, beyond the low, opposite bank, an amber chink widening above the horizon, as the cloud-canopy lifted. At one point the flood had torn a breach in the bank, and, pouring through, was making a lough in the hollowy field beneath, which helped to drain the upper reaches of the stream, and keep it from rising.

His anxious gaze, fixed on it all the way, discovered nothing until he came to the place where steep hills again hemmed it in on both sides, and where the turmoil caused by the meeting waters at war with the bogslide was furious still. So hopeless, in fact, seemed the outlook, that he was about to turn round and pursue his search in some other direction, when his eye was caught by a flutter of white ahead.



Quickly he discovered that this object, whatever it might be, was not in, though surrounded by, the water, whereupon he made for it with danger and difficulty, scrambling and wading along the base of the cliff wall, where in many places only the dangling tendrils of the ivy enabled him to pass.

He was soon at the point nearest to the enisled boulder, in full view of the two persons upon it: an unnaturally extended breadth of black cloak, and a little dark-haired girl in a white linen frock, crouching under a lopsided furze-bush. Wings of spray flapped over them continually.

"Herself it is," Nicholas said, and at the same instant wondered how he was to get across the few intervening feet of swirling foam. In another moment he had grasped a few trails of the long, tough ivy-tendrils, the root-fastness of which he tested by vigorous tugs, whereupon he twisted them rope-wise, and taking a turn of them round his wrist, swung himself over to the islet.

Only with his hands he reached it, as he fell on his knees just short of it; but no great harm was done, the shingly causeway being covered by not more than two or three feet of water. Drawing himself up with the less ease that he dared not let go his hold of his swing-rope, he lifted the little girl to her feet, and contrived to buckle a leathern belt round her waist and his own arm.

She was so dazed that she hardly noticed him, staring round her blankly, or hiding her eyes from the blinding spray; but old Joanna set up a

clamour for the loan of a hand "to give her a heft out of that." In his preoccupation with measures for Miss Dormer's safety, Nicholas was not more than dimly conscious of the old woman's vicinity, and merely a vague sense of something interrupting and reprehensible led him to ejaculate, "Hould your whist, and get along wid yourself, you ould pest of creation," just before he quitted the drowning boulder.

Half swinging and half scrambling, he conveyed his burden over to the cliffs, whence he made his way, now doubly difficult by reason of his load, as well as of an awkward twist which he had given himself in the course of his manœuvres. Many a step found such uncertain foothold that his own life and Miss Dormer's trembled in the balance, but at length these critical passages were all left behind, and soon afterwards he met, coming along, a search-party equipped with ropes and poles. It consisted of Christopher Considine, Henry Arfeld, and two or three working-men, for on their return from the observatory Henry Arfeld and his visitor had been moved, by Elizabeth Cramer's distress, to organise an expedition which might have better prospects of succeeding than Nicholas Garvin's unsupported venture.

"What good at all could he think to be doing, poor man," she had said, "and he skyting off head-foremost, without a notion where he was going, or the sense to wait for e'er a reasonable direction?"

Now when questioned about the particulars of his

unexpected success, Nicholas was so much taken up with Miss Minnie that he gave but a meagre account.

"I got her right enough, if the life isn't perished out of her. The hands of her is like ice. Miss Minette, asthore, you aren't hurted in any way? Had e'er a one of yous the wit to be bringin' a drop of spirits? or maybe wine would do better."

However, after a sip of weak whisky and water from Christy's flask had so far revived the little girl that she even could eat a fragment of chocolate, Nicholas detached his thoughts sufficiently to answer, in some fashion, the repeated enquiry whether he had found the child alone.

"Is it was there anybody along wid her? Well now, I couldn't be tellin' you this minyit. Let me see. Aye, bedad, accordin' to me recollection some description of an ould bein' there was roostin' in it, like a turkey-hin, and croakin' after me to come back for her—musha cock her up! I hope she'll be gettin' her health till I do, and Miss Minette near losin' her life along of her. Out among the lathers of foam she had her, above yonder, whatever divil-doings she was up to, and crawkin' there the ould sinner may very well be till the river falls agin, or else rises a bit, to put a stopper on her—herself and her tricks. So we ourselves had a right to be steppin' back home, the way Miss Minette may have a chance of gettin' some dry clothes on her."

This simple but austere course was adopted, only in a much-modified form, as while Henry Arfeld

returned with Nicholas and Minnie to the Hall, Christopher Considine and the other men proceeded in the opposite direction, bent on the rescue of undeserving old Joanna.

They were enabled by their number and equipment to accomplish it with little difficulty, old Joanna herself displaying an unlooked-for nimbleness.

Yet she was no sooner in safety than she began an unintelligible whimpering lamentation about some great piece of luck that she had lost in the river, and the good fortune of a notorious villain. She kept up all the way what seemed to her companions this querulous maundering of an aimless old demented body.

On reaching the breen, however, she found that news of a really substantial affliction awaited her. The riverside dwelling of her nephew, wherein she was wont to lodge, had been wrecked by a sudden incursion of the flood, and the household had fled for their lives, homeless and destitute. Their plight was, of course, shared by old Joanna, but she appeared to feel it less acutely than her own peculiar grievance.

In fact she was quite consoled by the gift of a five-shilling piece, which Mr. Considine, commiserating her bedraggled decrepitude, hastened to bestow upon her; and she hobbled off, with its strangely ample disc filling her palm, to ask of some neighbour shelter for the night.

Not that she had any intention of purchasing

it. She would bestow her silver crown in some recondite hiding-place, and apparently have no remuneration to offer except a "God reward you." There was little fear that she would fail to strike the bargain.

## CHAPTER XIII

### REPAIRS

AN hour or two after sundown on that same evening all the world overhead wore an aspect as serenely fair as Glenoona had ever beheld. The few clouds left in the sky hovered low on the horizon, like dim little moths, and a large, full-blown moon, risen clear of them, had not yet gathered more brightness than a white rose shines with in some twilit garden.

But on the earth beneath, traces of the storm's violence, just gone by, and of the springtide's unseasonable inclemency, were not so speedily to be effaced. Everywhere the countryside glimmered with [water lying in unwonted places; crystal pools usurped possession of green pasture-lands, an augury of lenten-fare to their ousted herds, and streams hurried to no purpose between highway hedgerows.

Here and there a devastated homestead or cluster of half-drowned cabins made a sorrier spectacle, and more than one lightning-blasted tree doubled its seared and distorted shape in the encroaching



mirror that crept about its roots to pave the woodland paths transparently.

Still, despite these flaws, there was abroad a potent charm, such as haunts the air at the hopeful time that brings the meeting of May with June. People who had come out of doors were loth to leave the soft freshness and fragrance, more especially if it was for a return to interiors peat-smoky and obscure.

This was the case with a number of neighbours, who were loitering about at the top of Murtagh Duffy's field. It bordered the river with a level strip, which tilted up into a gentle slope, and the beginning of this slope marked the highest point reached by the flood into which the Oona's fierce little affluent had swelled, and which was now as rapidly subsiding.

Murtagh's bit of grass, which he had fondly "put up for meadow," was bordered here with large, tongue-shaped splashes of black turf-mould, diluted into mud, whilst all the space intervening between them and the water's receding edge lay bestrewn with a tangled litter of brushwood, sedges, straw, and gravel, a big branch cropping up now and then, or a hurdle, or a few planks holding together.

As he ruefully surveyed it, the field's owner remarked that it had got a grand top-dressing, at any rate, and added that they wouldn't have much of a job mowing aught there was apt to be on it.

Perhaps he wished to anticipate pleasantries of the kind on the part of his friends, and in fact only

Joey Linders, who was professionally facetious, responded that it would be what you might call a light crop, unless you lengthened it out with the rushes, that had been washed up so handy. Rubbish, he added, was nigh as plenty as nothing at all.

Since the ceasing of the rain these people had been inspecting sundry dilapidations, and had now stopped to talk at a place which in more genial seasons was a favourite resort on fine, late-lighted evenings. A long-trunked elm, felled by a big wind many years ago, made such a convenient seat that in dry summer weather the sward round about it used to be worn by trampling feet, but it was at present embedded in a growth of rank, drenched weeds.

The six or seven men and boys, and Kate Mulcahy and Judy Gildea, stood in front of it looking towards the east, where the moon was brightening faster than she ascended.

"I wouldn't say but we might likely enough be gettin' a bit of dacint weather in it now for a while," Daniel MacFarlane said, as he scanned the heavens hopefully. "There's a claner appearance on it to-night than I seen this long time back."

"And a good sign, it to be takin' up about the full of the moon," Jerry O'Rourke assented.

At mention of the moon Stephen Garsted scowled, an action which lent superfluous gloom to a swarthy visage with projecting brows and jaws.

"'Tis the destruction of us she'll be very presently,

by all accounts—that's all the good signs I heard tell of," he said.

"What's ailin' her, then?" said Jerry O'Rourke.

"What some up above there could be tellin' you better than meself," Stephen replied, jerking back his elbow in the direction of the hill behind them.

"Och, quare stories and talk!" said Daniel MacFarlane.

"Quare talk there does be about quare things, sure enough," the elder Joe Mulcahy observed sententiously.

"Aye bedad, and plenty of quare things in it," added his wife. "'Twould frighten yous to hear what all the innicent child seen."

"And playin' his tricks agin Mr. Henry'll be this night," said Judy Gildea, "for didn't he say himself that a clear sky was what he wanted, the way he'd get a sight of the moon—and there she is as round as a plate."

"With ne'er a whit on her, aither," said Daniel MacFarlane, "after the romancin' about smashin' her into smithereens. Finely she's lookin'."

"She won't be so much longer, if he gets his chance this time," said Stephen Garsted, "that's just waitin' to set off his mischievius divil of a machine."

"'Tis the wonderful little invention altogether, to be raichin' that far," Daniel said, with sarcasm.

"Sure, for the matter of that," said Jerry O'Rourke, "they do have all manner of unnatural inventions these times. Some one was tellin' me

the other day that at a place up in the town of Galway a son of his seen a couple of choobs, tied together wid a string, and if you put the one of them agin your ear, and the other agin your mouth, you could be listenin' to whatever people were sayin' twinty mile off, or better, and spakin' back to thim."

"Och, tell that story to your aunt's grandmother's cat," said Andy Walsh, a long-legged hobbledehoy.

"If 'twas a young jackass he had a wish to be tellin anything, he wouldn't have very far to go, me fine lad," said Judy Gildea.

"Maybe Dan MacFarlane knows more about it," Mrs. Mulcahy said, assailing the other sceptic, "than Father Kelly himself, that our Joe heard Mr. Henry givin' an account of the terrible big crack he was after makin', and all the destruction would be prisently happenin'."

"What makes me ready enough to believe it," said Murtagh Duffy, "is that whatever story his Riverince heard, he thinks there's somethin' in it, or else why would he go for to bring in a strange Priest on us, that does he praichin' at us as if we were the worst in the world? Begorrah now, the discourse he had out of him last night about the Divil, and the black houles and corners, and the furnace-fires and all manner, attached to them hellish crathurs and places, would put you in dread of the minyits passin' by. But what raison his Riverince has to be threatenin' the people, I dunno, unless 'twas something he got news of up

above; for there's no special time of the year comin' on, like Easter or Michaelmas, to make him over particular."

"It would be that, you may depind," said Mrs. Mulcahy, "and small blame to him if he's doin' his endeavours to frighten some that wants the wit into their sinses before they have the sows shook out of their bodies wid the world splittin' in two halves about our ears, for the divarsion of himself above there, tinkerin' wid things he had a right to keep his hands off, and bad cess to him!"

"'Tis himself their Riverinces might better be discoorsin' to," said Larry Magee.

"Twinty pities it is," said Judy Gildea, "that somebody doesn't take and sling a couple of good big stones through the roof of his ugly little ould shed there, and smash up whatever he has inside it."

"Thrue for you, ma'am," responded a voice, as prompt as an explosion, and full of enthusiasm. It was Andy Walsh's.

"Aisy broke it would be, that I know," said Joey Linders, "for a one of the men he had to help wid carryin' the pieces of it, told me that Mr. Henry was leppin' round in front of them all the way, like a dog headin' cattle, and yap-yappin' to them to be most careful, because the laist tint of a knock or a fall might desthroy it entirely. Musha, if they knew but all, they might have tumbled over him very handy, when they had him under their feet, and shivered the whole concern into jomethry."

"And sure that might happen it yit, before he's much oulder," said Larry Magee; and the sentiment was well received.

These were, as it proved, preliminaries to the immediate organising of an enterprise, long vaguely brooded over by some Glenoona folk, and actually set about now without further delay.

The conjectures made as to Henry Arfeld's occupation at the same time were, in a certain degree, correct. After he had seen little Minnie Ree safely restored to her anxious caretaker, and had advised Nicholas Garvin to get out of his drenched garments and into bed, he had himself hastened to the observatory, waving aside suggestions of dinner, so eager was he to seize the rare opportunity of focusing his glass on the unclouded moon.

From his first prolonged scrutiny he turned away nothing less than aghast. All his worst forebodings were confirmed thereby: the fissure had extended itself dreadfully further across the glistening surface.

Having jotted down a few notes in pencil, he went and stood at the door, looking out on the world that lay ensphered and steeped in floods of translucent silver, the blue above and the green beneath glimmering through more softly than the wraith-like rainbow tints on an opal. He thought that he saw around him beauty inexorably doomed to speedy extinction in a ruining chaos. To judge by the imminence of the warning sign, it might well be that the white blossoms, half-



seen on yonder bush, would have hardly withered before the night's pearly lamp, fallen asunder, would come hurtling down, transformed into masses of inconceivable bulk.

His foreknowledge, a secret which he had, so to speak, surprised, made him feel as if he were guiltily conniving at a plot hatched by demon Titans. With an effort he constrained himself to look again through the telescope, and then continued to do so at intervals, drawn by a dismal fascination. Between whiles he made very alarming memoranda. The warning of a meditated attack, conveyed to him that forenoon by Joe Mulcahy, had escaped from his memory as completely as the conspiracy of "the beast Caliban" from the preoccupied mind of Prospero.

Thus employed he was found by Christy Considine, who, having returned from the rescue of old Joanna, presently visited the observatory to announce his acceptance of Lady Dorothy's offered hospitality for that night. Indeed, the only practicable road to Drumkyle was, at the moment, blocked, several hundred yards of it having been taken possession of by the crowded waters of the Oona river.

In reply to Henry Arfeld's gloomy report Christy did not say much, but he took a long look through the telescope, and carefully examined sundry small articles that were stowed away in a mahogany box. So profound was its owner's depression that although he had been wont to regard these acces-

sories as the apple of his eye, he now scarcely noticed, and heeded not at all, a stranger's researches among them. In the same apathetic mood he assented to the proposal that he should finish his notes and calculations, while Christy kept a watch on the moon.

Not many minutes had passed when Henry Arfeld heard himself called by his companion, and lifting up a distracted countenance said :

"As well as I can make out the fissure is lengthening at the rate of two degrees a day, and widening proportionately ; its depth I have no means of gauging, but it is apparently immense."

"Never mind about that now," said Christy, with his eye to the telescope, "but just look here."

Henry came over and looked, while the tube was adroitly shifted by his companion so as to bring successive sections of the moon's disc into his field of vision. No trace of a crack appeared.

"It's gone! by Jove, it's gone!" he said, stepping back from the telescope, and turning to Christy. "What can have happened ?"

"A new object-glass," said Christy—"that's about all, I think."

"In the moon, I mean," Henry said, uncomprehendingly.

"I suppose you never thought of examining this one," Christy said, handing it to him. "I took it out just now, having found that you had another."

"Oh yes, in case of accidents," said Henry, "but there haven't been any."

"Well, you see the lens has quite a considerable crack across it," said Christy, "which you apparently transferred to our neighbour, with tragical results."

"I see," said Henry, twirling the little circle about, and peering at it with short-sighted minuteness. "the crack was in the glass all the while, though how on earth it got there I can't imagine, for everything seemed to have travelled as safely as possible; and I noticed nothing amiss when I was putting it together."

"Probably the crack grew, after the manner of cracks," said Christy.

Henry took another look at the moon, and then another, using the flawed glass.

"There can be no doubt that it was as you say," he said, "and this must have been what misled me. In fact it was a case of

At times the black fly on the window-pane  
May seem the black ox on the distant plain.

Absurd enough, of course, but I'm uncommonly glad to have the matter cleared up."

His relief was really great, and the twinge of mortification caused, notwithstanding, by the collapse of his discovery afflicted him the less for this Tennysonian parallel to his error.

Christy, who was somewhat to seek in polite literature, replied, without recognising the quotation:

"Do you know that you are looked upon by a

good many of your neighbours as a much less respectable character than any black ox? Some reports of the moon's dangerous state have evidently got about, and you are held responsible for her dilapidations, as well as for discovering them."

"Father Kelly must have talked, then," said Henry—"nobody else knew. I never even told my wife; not that she'd have minded, for her scepticism about astronomy is incredible. I believe she still thinks that the sun goes round the earth."

"There's no lack of faith among these people, at any rate," said Christy, "and their feelings towards you are far from charitable, which is but natural, considering the extraordinary notions they have taken up. One of the men who came with us this evening uttered dark speeches, that seemed to foreshadow some sort of conspiracy for the purpose of destroying the pernicious instruments you use here. And when I brought back the little girl to your housekeeper she said she had feared that the old woman might have enticed the child away out of revenge, mistaking her for your daughter."

"Perhaps I'd better ask Father Kelly to explain about it," said Henry. "That's the least he may do, as it must have been he who spread the reports."

But Father Kelly was not to be given a chance of thus making amends in time for his supposed indiscretion, for at this moment, through the open space left by the sliding back of the roof, a

big fistful of a stone came, violently hurled, and, narrowly missing the telescope and the two men, crashed against the wooden wall, a board in which it splintered. From outside rose a murmur of voices.

The fact was that a party of some twenty men and boys, whose hostility to Mr. Arfeld and his scientific experiments had been kindled anew by the day's disasters, and fanned into fury by the denunciations of more ardent orators, had marched upon the Arfelds' demesne with the avowed object of wrecking "Mr. Henry's bastely little gazebo"—and himself along with it some fiercer spirits added, of course. They had now reached a larch-grove, up to which the kitchen-garden sloped, and from which the observatory was separated by only a few paces. On the edge of this grove they had halted simultaneously, at the sign of the shifted roof, which betokened that the observatory was occupied.

"Whist now, keep quiet, and be aisy there for a bit," was the whispered word that went round, admonishing the rash and over-hasty members of their band. The pause was merely to concert further measures, but Andy Walsh, who feared that the hesitation might end in the collapse of their attack, and who felt a store of well-chosen ammunition burning in all his pockets, could not refrain from suddenly launching a missile, with the result described above.

"It'll be smashed—ruined—confound them!"

Henry Arfeld shouted, tugging violently at the pulley-rope that moved the roof. "Catch hold of the other one, Considine—d'you see it hanging there? We must get this back into its place. No, not that way, man!"

But Christy had thought fit to adopt a different course. Rushing to the door he flung it open, and confronted the attacking party from its threshold.

"Come along here, all of you," he called in tones of joyous excitement to the figures dimly seen among the trees. "Come along for your lives, and get a look at it; it's worth seeing, I can tell you. Splendid! And as queer a story as ever you heard."

He did not appeal in vain to the most easily tickled of passions. Incited by curiosity, the ringleaders headed a scampering movement, and reached the wooden stair with expressions changed to pleased interest. As he marshalled detachments of them up and down Christy continued to promote this mood by word and gesture, laughing and joking, and turning out the ridiculous side of the blunder.

"Mr. Arfeld here has just discovered," he would say, "that all this while he has been looking at the moon through a cracked glass, and wondering why she didn't fall in pieces. I suppose she knew the reason herself. Well now, one would have thought the notion might have occurred to him that a thing of this sort"—showing the little object-glass—"was the likelier to get cracked of the



two ; but sure, it's easy to guess the riddle after you've been told the answer. I might have found worse cracks in her myself. Take a look at her now ; she's so clear that you'd see if there was so much as the scratch of a pin on her."

It may be doubted whether anybody did, in fact, see much of the moon through the telescope on that occasion, for the tramping of as many feet as the flimsily-constructed edifice would hold, and the crowding and jostling about the stand, produced strong oscillations, which hindered a steady view.

Still, everybody had at least a glimpse of some white thing swinging to and fro, and the moon herself was reassuringly visible, as she sat and smiled on the night, so that what with the authoritative contradiction of alarmist rumours, and the brighter prospect of fair weather, and the strange gentleman, who was "very pleasant in himself intirely," and familiar Mr. Henry, whose apologetic affability restored him to the status of "a dacint poor lad," all hostile sentiments soon died away.

Terms of such cordiality, indeed, were established that an offer of refreshments at the House was declined only out of consideration for the approach of the small hours, and that Andy Walsh, remembering his premature act of hostility, judged it expedient to slip home unostentatiously along by-paths, as befitted a worsted competitor for popular applause.

Not that he altogether forwent this. In after

days he might sometimes be heard boasting to a chosen audience of the exploit by which he claimed to have "frightened Mr. Henry out of playin' any more mischievious tricks with his ould machine—and, signs on it, the summer was as fine a one as you could wish to see." But the next time that Murt Mulcahy began to expatiate on his experiences when ambushed in the observatory, he was peremptorily silenced: they had lost their vogue.

## CHAPTER XIV

### THE END OF A PLOT

THAT night was a very miserable one for Nicholas Garvin. The effects of his sprain and his prolonged drenching tormented him physically, and mentally he was harassed by innumerable anxieties about Miss Dormer.

As he lay feverishly wider and wider awake the thought which troubled him most often was a recurrent remembrance of his own extreme stupidity shown in not having brought her, upon her rescue, straight back to the Cramers' much nearer house, instead of to the Hall, where she must be in continual danger of recognition. Already she had, under cover of a closely wrapped great-coat, narrowly escaped being seen by Mr. Considine, who would in all probability have noticed her strong likeness to Master Michael; and with Master Michael himself she would certainly meet, if they were both staying at the Hall, then everything would be found out, and Miss Minette carried off to a convent. "And sure he might better have let the wild river sweep her away, and be done with it."

Round the stones on the bank, he remembered, there was foam as full of little cells as a honeycomb, that kept on blinking into nothing while you looked at them; and so were convents full of little white cells, stark and stony, that never opened. What would become of her if she was shut up in one of them? He must get up very early, and bring her back to the Cramers, where she would be tolerably safe. It would not be hard to find some excuse.

So he tossed about, devising pretexts, less and less rational as his temperature rose, and resolving to be up at the earliest moment possible. But before that arrived, he fell into a half-waking doze, not to be shaken off at will, which disarranged his plans.

It was the most brilliant of mornings, with clear drops bejewelling all its greenery, and a breeze strong enough to stir the leaves, though not their branches, so that the latticed shadows flickered as they crept off the grass. The three Arfeld children and Michael Dormer ran out of doors betimes; but Elizabeth Cramer so urgently insisted on the expediency of Miss Minnie's staying quiet in the house for a while, lest she should have taken cold yesterday, that she could only look wistfully through the window, and keep a watch for some unobserved opportunity.

When Michael had played games till he was tired with the others, who were older and more energetic, he slipped away from them, by the favour of hide-

and-see, and went about his own devices, which involved no violent exercise at all.

He was sitting in the pleasure-grounds on a roomy, inverted flower-pot, with a grassy-steeped hillock behind him, when he saw coming towards him, down the long, laurel-canopied walk, a figure, the very first glimpse of which seemed to fill the world with marvellous delight. Something assured him that this was what it had long since become a part of his life to remember sorrowfully, and never dream of seeing again ; and the nearer the figure drew, the more his certainty strengthened.

It was taller, indeed, than the image in his memory, nor did the home-made linen frock quite correspond with that ; but these were mere trivialities, of no account to Michael, as he beheld the small head, with softly-waved masses of dark hair drawn back from brow to nape, and the great grey-black eyes, unchanged as unforgotten, and the slender, brown hands—even on one wrist the little silver bangle with its alternate filigree beads and links, and blue enamelled speedwell clasp, formerly a familiar object of his admiration, now restored to give his joyful conviction the finishing touch.

For perhaps half a minute he sat gazing with wide eyes in which the wonder grew ; then he made a headlong rush, well-nigh oversetting the person whom he met and startled, grasped in a rapturous hug.

“ Oh, my Minette,” he said, “ if it’s you, don’t ever go away again ! ”

Minette who, having seen nobody approach, was completely taken by surprise, looked down a little way at him, half bewildered for a moment before she said :

"Why, it's Michael—it really and truly is! Oh, 'Cellino, I *am* glad, I'm most extraordinarily glad."

It seemed to Michael of a piece with the exceptional character of the event that she did not add, as had so often disappointingly happened : "Run off now, Michael ; I want to finish this story. I'll play with you to-morrow," but on the contrary continued to hold him tightly, and repeat her expressions of gladness.

Presently they came to the end of the laurel-walk, and as the big flower-pot did not afford seats for two, they sat down on the lowest of the hillock's swarded steps, regardless of its decidedly damp condition. Here, finding himself conveniently near, Michael threw an arm round Minette's neck, and kissed her with a fervour inspired by joy at his sudden relief from a longing and loneliness endured for a period vaster than can well be imagined by anybody over nine years old.

At this moment Evangeline Arfeld, with her brothers, in the course of their noisy quest for Michael came ramping over the hillock, from the top of which they stood looking down on the pair below. What she saw was so shocking to her ideas about the fitness of things social that she galloped down the ledged slope, and seizing Michael by the arm, tried to drag him away from his sister.



"Come along," she commanded him. "You shouldn't have anything to do with her; she belongs to Elizabeth Cramer, who's just a sort of servant, and you're a young gentleman. Mother'd be excessively angry if I told her. They're quite poor people. Let her alone, will you? I tell you she's a nasty, common child."

Thereupon her brother Otto, who was close behind, said:

"You shut up, Eve, you great idiot of a little jackass! You've no business to be calling people names."

He emphasised this injunction by grasping a thick strand of her hair, and giving it a violent tug backwards. She wheeled round, hitting out at him furiously, and in another moment, joined by Hal, they were scuffling inextricably in the middle of the path.

The struggle was still at its height when Christy Considine, strolling before breakfast, came by and separated them.

"What's all this about?" he enquired, standing between the combatants. "Two boys fighting with a girl! You might find something better to do."

Abashed by the intervention of "company," the young Arfelds only muttered incoherencies about pulling hair, calling names, and kissing Minnie Ree.

They then retreated down the long, straight walk, interchanging on the way slight shoves and

thumps, which waxed more pronounced the further they withdrew, and which portended a speedy resumption of the engagement as soon as they were out of sight round the corner.

Christy Considine now turned his attention to the small boy and girl, who had sat watching the fray as impassive as two images of Buddha, only their large eyes were alive and bright.

"Well, Mick," said Christy, "I'm glad to see that *you* haven't got out of bed on the wrong side this fine morning."

"Yes," said Michael. "And aren't you glad to see that here's my sister Minette come back again after all this ever so long?"

"Why, Mick," Christy said, startled naturally enough, for it was the first time he had heard Mick refer to his loss, "my dear child, you must know very well that it can't be."

He stopped short, being startled once more, as he was struck by the singular likeness between the two children's faces. Save for the difference in height, which was inconsiderable, they might have been supposed the most facsimile type of twins.

"What is your name, my dear?" he asked of the little girl.

"When I lived in Italy it used to be Hermione Dormer," she replied, "but now they call me the Irish for it, which is Minnie Ree."

Having excogitated this theory to explain her change of name, she gave it as a fact in all sincerity.

"And who do you live with now?" asked Christy.

"With Mrs. Cramer," said Minette. "And I was wishing, before I came out this morning, that she hadn't come here, for I like Drumkyle much better. There aren't any bad, old black-cloaky women anywhere near it"—she glanced round her apprehensively—"or any cross children running about; and I think Mr. Claude hasn't gone quite away. But if we had stayed there perhaps I wouldn't ever have found Michael, and that would have been a very dreadful pity."

"The fat girl," Michael put in, "said that Minette belongs to the woman who was sewing upstairs. They all seem to be as stupid as three pigs, for of course she belongs to father and mother; and she has their pictures in the clasp of her bracelet." As he spoke he pressed a spring, which disclosed two tiny medallion portraits. Christy, stooping to look, saw that Michael had described them rightly.

"How did you come over to Ireland, Minette?" he asked. "Who brought you?"

"Nicholas Garvin took me and Sandra Villandi away, because he said it was living in Italy that made me ill," said Minette. "And he used to say that he thought all the others might come, too, some day soon. But nobody ever came any day, for ages and ages and ages, except 'Cellino just this minute, *il mio fratello*. So now perhaps the others will be here really some very soon day."

"You will have to be content with Michael, I fear, little Minette," said Christy; "but you shall not be separated again—I can promise you that. And I must see what Nicholas Garvin has to say about this extraordinary business. Here he comes himself, I believe."

Nicholas, waking up at length to a dismayed consciousness that it was dangerously late, had risen, dizzy of head and tremulous of limbs, and had gone out in haste, keeping, with difficulty, before his mind the thought of how he must find Miss Dormer, and convey her away from these peril-fraught precincts.

He staggered along at first, feeble and bewildered; but after a while the fresh air and rippling sunshine seemed to strengthen him and clear his wits, so that when he shortly came upon the Arfeld children quarrelling in a shrubbery, he was able to question them quite collectedly about Minnie Ree. Rather over-awed by the tense, hawk-like eagerness with which he seemed ready to pounce on the information, they told him that they had seen her last at the other end of the laurel-walk, and he hurried on, cheered by a gleam of hope.

But though the glint of a white frock cherished it for a moment, it was quickly extinguished as he caught sight of Mr. Considine—yes, and Master Michael along with him; for what chance was there that the whole thing hadn't come out? "Aye, aye, and the two children sitting side by side forenent him, the way he couldn't help noticing

that they were as like one another as the halves of a split pea."

However, he determined to put a bold face on the matter, and not to let slip even the ghost of a chance, this being his habit as he wandered through a strange world.

Accordingly he walked up to the little group with an air of unconcern, and said :

"Good morning, sir. I've come to fetch Minnie Ree in to her breakfast, sir."

Whereupon Mr. Considine, looking hard at him, said :

"Oh, have you, Garvin ? Then I suppose you can tell me who Minnie Ree is ? "

Nicholas accepted defeat.

"Whoever she is I might better have left her below in the river," he said, harking back to his nightly dreams of despair. "As well off she'd be there as in the place them ones'll take and put her in now, poor Miss Minette."

"What on earth are you talking about, Garvin ? " said Mr. Considine.

"Convents," said Nicholas, "and nuns, and high walls, where she may fret her life out for the rest of her days, when once she's clapped behind them."

"And who is in the least likely to do anything of the sort ? " said Mr. Considine, moving on a few steps, to be out of the children's hearing.

"Old Mrs. Dormer and Miss Beatrice," said Nicholas, "who got leave from the poor master, not long before he died, by raison of some quare

notion he took in his head, that he was very sorry for a little while after. So just when he was quitting he bid me be telling the ladies he wouldn't allow Miss Minette next or nigh a convent at all, let alone making a nun of her. But, worse luck, he went off before I could get to set it down in black and white, that was the only way it would be a hair of use, with them two ready to dance jig polthogue at the thought of having a hold on her. Sign his name he couldn't, God help him, or scarce make an offer at it."

"I must say that from what I knew of Mr. Dormer," said Christy, "it seems a very incredible story."

Yet as he spoke there came into his mind a remembrance of how, with the lamentations of old Mrs. Dormer and her daughter over the tidings of Minette's death, there had been mingled references to the heavenly bridal that was now forgone on earth, and to the holy refuge from worldly snares, which the child would have found even on this side of the grave. At the time he had assumed these to be merely vague, pious sentiments, but in the light of Nicholas's assertions they seemed to gain a more definite significance.

"So then," Nicholas continued, without heeding the interruption, "I thought the best thing I could do, when I got that good chance going to fetch her, and finding her took very bad, would be to let on she was after gettin' her death in the fever, and to keep her meself, out of their way—themselves



and their colloquing wid Reverend Sisters streeeling about in long veils. I mind an ould fat one of them I'd meet now and again on the stairs, liker a smallish haystack she was than aught else, stumpin' up and down, suppose it had a scorch of black on it. . . . I contrived it all right enough."

"It was a most unwarrantable proceeding," said Christy, "and quite unnecessary, even from your point of view, as I am guardian to both the children, and certainly would never have chosen a convent for her."

"If I'd known that you had the charge of her itself, sir," said Nicholas, "how could I tell, then, what way of thinking you might be, or that the ladies mightn't get round you with their palaverin'? For aught I knew you mightn't have had a dale more sinse than themselves."

"Old Mrs. Dormer died soon after her son," said Christy; "and when I saw Miss Beatrice abroad, a short time ago, she was about to marry a Peruvian merchant, and set off to live in Lima. Her thoughts were apparently much less occupied with convents and such things than they used to be."

But these statements made no impression on Nicholas, over whose faculties a dreary mist was creeping back. Nothing seemed to penetrate it except the one masterful anxiety which had possessed his mind so long. The strange world swung round him in such violent jerks that he staggered dizzily up against a tree, and as he tried to steady himself, with an arm round its trunk, he muttered :

"They'll get her now, so they will. I hadn't the wit to leave her at the dacent ould woman's house below. 'Twas the river roarin' bothered me head, or else I'd have thought of it."

"You ought to be in your bed now, that's certain," Christy said, and Elizabeth Cramer, who just then arrived in quest of Miss Minnie, was quite of the same opinion, on which she acted by proceeding to coax and guide Nicholas indoors.

When Christy had seen this accomplished, and the despatch of a messenger, who undertook to "fetch Dr. Doran to the poor man in half no time," he went to look for Lady Dorothy, that he might announce the no doubt welcome intelligence of his intended departure with Michael immediately after breakfast, and at the same time apologise for the unavoidable prolongation of Nicholas Garvin's stay.

"We must have been an egregious nuisance," he said, "quartering ourselves on you in this promiscuous way, and getting even into your clothes."

He referred to the fact that in place of his own hopelessly water-logged garments he was, with difficulty, wearing Henry Arfeld's most capacious great-coat. It had a fur collar, and cuffs, on sleeves a world too short, which gave him an air of Arctic discomfort in the summer sunshine.

But he found Lady Dorothy in a genial mood. The clearing of the atmosphere had soothed her nerves, the marked improvement in her husband's spirits had caused her own to rise correspondingly,

and a consciousness of some shortcomings on the day before made her wish to retrieve her character as a hostess. Hence she so strongly protested against his going until the roads were reported to be more passable, that he agreed to wait at least for the doctor's opinion on Nicholas Garvin.

This point being settled, she offered him her congratulations on his engagement, of which she had heard from her sister. As nothing made the subject less pleasantly interesting to Lady Dorothy than her acquaintances' matrimonial prospects very naturally were, and as it was to her guest the most absorbing and delightful of topics, they discussed it at length during a tête-à-tête breakfast, for which everybody else came late.

Miss Hall's character was sketched by her fiancée in glowing terms, and he much deplored the destruction of her photograph, which a soaking sustained in his pocket yesterday had completely spoiled, and which, though it by no means did her justice, might have conveyed some faint image of her charms.

Lady Dorothy was trying to trace anything resembling human lineaments on the torn and crumpled card, submitted to her inspection, when Jim Brady brought in the post-bag. Stealthily following him came Mrs. Willester, who behind Mr. Considine's back testified her dissatisfaction at his presence by gestures which her daughter-in-law feigned not to see, and who then slipped into a screened-off corner out of sight.

Jim reported that Black Donagh, the boy who carried the letters, had walked through more wet than dry and more water than wet—and running water at that—and had had to lep as many leps coming along as there would be in half a dozen steeple-chases. Also that he had brought Mr. Considine's bag, which the postmistress at Glenoona was wishful should be delivered without delay because it contained "a registered parcel, with a little paper belonging, that Mr. Considine would want to plase put his own name to."

Having signed the green receipt-form, and seen that the packet had been sent by Gray and Eberle, Mr. Considine could not refrain from asking permission to open it, nor yet from exhibiting its contents to Lady Dorothy, chiefly on account of the opportunity thus gained for resuming the subject nearest to his heart.

Very genuine was the admiring interest which Lady Dorothy expressed at the display, for the rows of pearls and whorl of diamonds and emeralds had much intrinsic beauty, besides being, as the bridegroom's present to the bride, transfigured by an atmosphere of romance.

He had been lucky, he said, when up in Dublin the other day, to light on what he thought would just suit Elsie Hall. In fact it was two pieces of luck, as Gray and Eberle were selling the necklace for a lady at Rathkennan, who, he knew from other sources, wished to dispose of it without delay.

She was an inmate of one of the queer little homes set up there lately, The Half Square, or more properly speaking The Independency, and though she had been got in by a plant on the part of a rather pernicious old hag—Christy little recked that his audience comprised this schemer's daughter-in-law, and herself in the congenial character of eavesdropper—was really a very charming girl; so much so, in the opinion of a friend of his, that he would not feel at all surprised if before long she left The Half Square for a more suitable establishment.

The sale of the necklet, indeed, Christy continued, unwontedly garrulous, might be a preliminary to such an event, for he had noticed that the clearing out of one or two milliners' shops was generally regarded as an essential part of the marriage ceremony.

Now, he didn't believe that, although no girl could dress in more perfect taste, Elsie Hall cared a farthing what she wore; she always seemed to like things that were quite simple and plain. Here a costly gleam as from sunlit rime flashed into his eyes with an irony to which he was not so impervious but that it cut short his paradoxical lover's tale. He broke off, half conscious of his own absurdity, and set about replacing the necklet in its case.

Peering and listening from behind her screen, Mrs. Willester all this while had kept her ears pricked up most erectly in the hope of hearing

that extremely interesting detail—the price paid for the pearls.

Disappointed therein, she drew only a doubtful kind of comfort from the conjecture that he had got them dirt cheap, and did not care to mention it, for however soothing might be the thought that but small gains had accrued to the fraudulent vendors of *her* property, it was seriously counterbalanced by her regret at the supposed driving of a bargain so much in favour of “that odious boor, Mr. Considine.”

Knowledge of how matters actually stood would have, on the whole, increased her exasperation, as the purchase had been one of the most extravagant acts that Christy had ever committed.

Even without any added aggravation her mood was in a high degree wrathful and injured. She had a sense that good fortune was being rained on everybody except herself—a Gideon’s fleece parching in unmerited drought. All the world, it seemed, were buying and selling, and marrying and inheriting, with ungodly success, while she was left stranded, unrighteously debarred from the means of turning the chances she had almost grasped to any account.

It was maddening. She positively ground her teeth at the sound of the click with which that man closed his case of jewels. But worse things still were speedily to befall her.

By-and-by a faint rustling and crackling showed her that the others were looking through their correspondence, and then, when she had just made up



her mind to emerge and see whether anything had come for her, she heard Mr. Considine exclaim :

“By Jove! I’m afraid I’ll have to run up to Dublin again. Here’s a letter from one of the most pig-headed young asses that I know. He’s been having transactions, dead against everybody’s advice, with an especially nefarious sort of stock-jobber—a Jew going by the name of Levi Pole, who keeps a bucket-shop in Lambert Street. It appears that this man has now absconded, in consequence of the collapse of two or three swindling companies, so my speculative friend is in despair, and writes to ask me what on earth he had better do next. I should imagine that there’s really nothing to be done. Of course he’ll never see again a penny that he’s put into the fellow’s hands, and if, as I strongly suspect, he’s been investing in unlimited liability concerns, he’ll probably lose every farthing he possesses. However, I would be better able to judge on the spot. He has as much notion of writing a business letter as a cow.”

Mrs. Willester overheard these last sentences through a seething surge of dismay. Levi Pole was no other than the man whom she had for months past regarded as the expert builder up of her fortunes, which were now, she learned, shattered into ruin. At the word “absconded” the earth seemed to stop spinning with a violent jerk, that made everything on it topple and reel about her.

If this horrible story were true, as she did not for a moment doubt, insolvency and penury awaited

her. Far from winning approval and applause as the talented amasser of affluence, she would be blamed and despised as an incapable dupe, whose folly had brought her to burdensome beggary. This sentimental aspect of the calamity afflicted her most, though she was not by any means indifferent to the loss of creature comforts and other solid advantages, which it would no less certainly entail.

Some little time afterwards Lady Dorothy was rather startled by coming on her mother-in-law, whom she had supposed to have retreated from the presence of the obnoxious Mr. Considine, still seated at the side-table, in a state of obvious perturbation. She accounted for it, without much plausibility, by professing uneasiness at not having received any news of her husband from Dublin; and after a hurried pretence at a breakfast withdrew to write letters. The one or two which she did compose were wild and incoherent, but contained no reference to Mr. Willester.

Her enemy had already gone out, unaware of her vicinity, to see how Nicholas Garvin was faring in his room over the stable. It appeared expedient to Christy that the revelations about Minette Dormer, otherwise Minnie Ree, should be, as far as possible, suppressed until Nicholas was able to give a more lucid and trustworthy account of the matter than he had hitherto done, illness having evidently excited and confused him.

Christy, accordingly, did not mention the discovery to his hostess when expressing regret at

the trouble she was caused. Amiable still, she only deplored the fact that her husband had not known about it when he set off to the village, as he might have saved time by leaving a message for the doctor.

Mr. Arfeld had gone early to call on Father Kelly, whose help he wished for in contradicting an absurd report, which had somehow been spread through the neighbourhood, about something he thought he saw most dreadfully wrong with the moon, when all the while it was only a flaw in the glass of his telescope.

"To tell you the truth," Lady Dorothy had added, "I should not be sorry if the mistake put him out of conceit with it. I often wish that he were rid of it, for it leads to his going out on cold, frosty nights, and sitting up till all hours. And now, if he takes to finding mare's-nests in the moon, and driving himself distracted about them, it will really be most tiresome."

Christy had expressed a conviction that such a blunder was very unlikely to happen again, and had gone his way, hoping to find Nicholas capable of some rational conversation.

## CHAPTER XV

### NICHOLAS GARVIN'S CARETAKER

WHAT Christy did find was that Dr. Doran had just arrived, and had formed an unfavourable opinion of the patient.

Nicholas Garvin was suffering from congestion of the lungs, with threatenings of pneumonia, as well as other complications, and all his symptoms were grave. So far from having become clearer in mind, he was lapsing into a state of more and more constant delirium, and the burden of his muttered ravings was always Miss Dormer's perilous plight, for which he blamed himself hardly less bitterly than he did her too zealous grandmother and aunt.

The reassuring statements made to him that morning had taken no hold on his memory, and he was possessed by a belief that the discovery of her identity placed her in imminent danger of being carried off and immured for life in a convent cell. As his fever increased his delusions grew wilder and more vivid, mixing themselves up with his experiences of the day before, so that

the dark waves and foamy wreaths of the flooded river turned into a crowd of black and white veils and coifs rushing in pursuit of the little girl.

During his more rational intervals, which waxed fewer and briefer, he was too much oppressed to attempt any detailed explanations, merely declaring that Anastasia MacElvery at Rathkennan knew all about everything. Often he expressed a wish to see her, but always added :

"Not that she'd come—ne'er a foot of her. She wouldn't lave the little fat girl that she thinks such a dale of—Miss Eileen. I'll be jiggered if I know why: she's not a patch on Miss Minette. And sure that was what I wrote the other day to Anastasia, and I about comin' to Drumkyle: a long sight better off she'd be, says I to her, mindin' Miss Minette in a house of her own; and an uncommon handy way for Miss Minette herself, to have the both of us looking after her—but not a bit of Anastasia would; she'd liefer stop along wid Mrs. Hume and Miss Eileen, as contrary as a drawer jammed crooked, that won't stir good or bad. There'd be no use axin' her to come next or nigh me."

In the course of that day Elizabeth Cramer, having heard some of his murmurs to this effect, made a communication to Mr. Considine.

"Me cousin Anastasia, sir," she said, "is up now in Dublin, bringin' little Miss Eileen to visit her poor grandfather, who's mighty indifferent; and Miss Verold, that's a great friend to young

Mrs. Willester, is there with them. I'm after getting a letter this morning from Anastasia with word that she's just about going home to Rathkennan, so I was thinkin', sir, 'twouldn't take her much out of her way supposing she came round by Glenoona. She could be stopping with her own people, or else below at me father-in-law's, that's more convenient—Herself there has ever a hundred welcomes before Anastasia MacElvery—and then she could see the poor man here, that has such a wish for her. He'll scarce die content if he's thwarted—and maybe she herself might happen to think bad of it when it's too late. Anybody could very easy send her a wire from the post-office."

Elizabeth's suggestion commended itself to Mr. Considine, and the telegram was despatched.

Henry Arfeld could not see Father Kelly, who had gone with the missionary to Castlemartin on the previous day, and had not yet returned. They had been expected back the same evening, Biddy Hogan the housekeeper said, but most likely they were delayed by the floods, that were running wild all over the country; and as soon as his Reverence came home she would let him know that Mr. Arfeld was asking for him.

She kept this promise when the two priests arrived on the following morning; and while she gave her master's garments a brushing, badly needed, as he had more than once been "bogged entirely," she did not fail to inform him, among



other items of local news, how they had found out that the awful big crack in the moon was only, after all, something amiss with poor Mr. Henry's telescope.

"Aye bedad, and the boys startin' out the night before last to wreck it on him, a thing they had no right to go do, only they got word in time."

Confirmation of these tidings reached Father Kelly from other sources, and much relieved his mind.

Yet his satisfaction was not unalloyed, for he could not but feel some chagrin at having fallen into such an error, and at the steps which he had, in consequence, taken. The affair was one that might very easily be represented in a ludicrous light, especially if it became known that it had led to his request for a mission. He would never hear the last of it. A laugh raised against him by his clerical brethren would roll on, echoing and re-echoing all through the diocese. In these circumstances he thanked his stars that Father McLoughlin's sojourn at Glenoona was ending that very day; and he hoped by good luck to get him safely out of the parish, still unacquainted with the scare about the moon.

So in the afternoon Father Kelly set out on foot to see his guest off by the long-car, which started from Hugh Cronin's. On the way Father McLoughlin made a remark, which he intended to be complimentary, but which Father Kelly found somewhat embarrassing.

"Well now," said Father McLoughlin, "I must say I think you've been taking away the characters of your parishioners. From what the Bishop told me I expected to find them all drinking and fighting together, with the public-houses full and the chapel empty, and every sort of devilment going on from morning till night. But upon my word, to the best of my judgment, they're as quiet and decent a set of people as ever I preached to, and as attentive to their religious duties. I've seen the creatures coming in to Mass out of the teems of rain, with the water running off them in streams, and they kneeling down in pools of it, apt to stiffen them for life. You might have heard me telling them, for encouragement, that every drop was as good as so much holy water. I declare now, if your people are the most you have to complain of, there's little enough ails you."

"Oh, but you've only seen them on their best behaviour, John McLoughlin; you must remember that," Father Kelly hastened to reply. "If you knew as much of them as I do you wouldn't be very long altering your opinion."

And then, round just the next turn, as though arranged by some propitious fate to prove the depravity of his flock, they came upon what seemed to be a free fight raging in the middle of the road.

It was, indeed, a less serious fray than he could have wished, for when the scuffling combatants had fallen apart they turned out to be merely Bill Garsted, a lanky hobbledehoy, with the brothers

Joe and Murt Mulcahy, the latter of whom could not rank as anything more formidable than a small-sized gossoon. The only on-lookers were two alarmed little girls, of whom one was dismally wailing.

Such as it was, however, Father Kelly determined to make the most of it, and sternly demanded of the trio what they meant by their scandalous misconduct, brawling on the public highway, and bringing the whole parish into disrepute before the eyes of a stranger. At this Bill Garsted promptly took to his heels, by either hand chucking along a short-legged sister, constantly exhorted to come on with herself out of that.

Thus the two Mulcahys alone were left to receive Father Kelly's admonishments.

"I suppose the truth is," he said rhetorically, "that you have been giving way to intemperance, the vice that discredits and curses your country, and have been indulging in strong drink, and both of you pledged."

To Murt, the gossoon, this accusation seemed a most gratifying acknowledgment of his manliness, and his wish was that it might appear well justified. He therefore modelled his behaviour upon that observed in his elders when similarly situated, and rolling his eyes in what he considered to be a drunken manner, he muttered something about having, belike, a sup taken.

But his big brother Joe laughed derisively and said :

"Is it himself to be drinkin' ? Troth and bedad, a sup of sour butter-milk is all the sups he's apt to get the chance of. The likes of him settin' himself up to take pledges—*musha moyah* ! unless it was agin bulls'-eyes and sugarsticks. And sure, your Riverince, just now he was after stirrin' up Bill Garsted to be slingin' a clod of clay at me from behind the bank there, that he dursn't do himself, so I was givin' the two of them a couple of clouts to quieten them a bit. That's the whole of it, your Riverince."

But his Reverence, who was still bent on taking a solemn view of the matter, put an ill-advised question to Murt :

"And what reason at all, Murt Mulcahy, had you for attacking your brother ?"

"Givin' me impidence he was, your Riverince," said Murt, "about the big crack in the moon, and sayin' it was all lies, when every word's true, that about fallin' in pieces on our heads it will be directly, only Mr. Arfeld up and told the lads it wouldn't, for fear they'd take and break th' ould telescope he seen it through."

"Oh, for shame !" Father Kelly said, moving on suddenly. "I wonder you have the face to stand there talking so foolish, and certainly I've something else to do besides listening to you. Hold your tongue and run home. . . . A crazy little bosthoon," he explained to Father McLoughlin, "who says the first demented thing that comes into his head."

"Ah, then the shindy wasn't much of a one, after all," Father McLoughlin rejoined encouragingly, and Father Kelly had to acquiesce in this depreciation of his street row, for fear of awkward enquiries.

When the long-car had started he bent his steps towards the Hall, being anxious to learn the object of Mr. Arfeld's visit, and to hear further particulars about his latest astronomical discovery.

At this time Nicholas Garvin was lying in a very critical condition. An aggravation of all his worst symptoms, accompanied now by a rapid failure of strength, gave reason for the gloomiest forebodings. Dr. Doran, who had just come and gone for the second time that day, pronounced it to be touch and go with him, and doubted whether he would live to receive another call.

He was seemingly almost unconscious of what went on around him. A telegram from Anastasia MacElvery, announcing that she would arrive next morning, was read to him, but he gave no sign of comprehension; and he barely recognised the two little Dormers, who were brought to see him.

The general opinion that he would "hardly over the night" roused a stir of not wholly unpleasurable excitement among the neighbours, and Elizabeth Cramer, who had been installed as head nurse, found it an arduous part of her duties to keep the sick-room from filling inconveniently with volunteer assistants. On their services being dis-

pensed with, these for the most part lingered in the yard, about the door at the foot of the short stair, where they discussed the case in all its bearings, and drew confident inferences from any others that had, to their knowledge, terminated fatally, though ranging in diversity from a fractured skull to St. Vitus's dance.

Things being thus, it was natural that a glimpse of Father Kelly's approach, caught through the ivy-arched yard-gates, should add a finishing touch to the dramatic interest with which the situation thrilled these lookers-on.

Taking it for granted that he had been summoned, a detachment of them rushed out to waylay him with the information where the sick man was, and how mortal bad entirely.

"Not a minute to spare, your Riverince—in here he is, and that's the door right forenint you."

But to Lizzie White, the cook, fell the even more desirable office of announcing the arrival. She was a small, spare woman, upon whom a life spent in the glow of kitchen firesides seemed to have had a shrivelling and crisping effect. Now, with unsurpassable agility, she whisked up the stair to Nicholas's loft, which she entered as if propelled by a violent gust, though in fact by the consciousness that Molly Cronin was following at her heels.

"The Priest's in it," she proclaimed; "comin' up here he is directly. Glory be to God, he'll have time, anyway, to anoint the crathur while the breath's in his body."



In reply to which a voice rose husky and quavering, but quite sufficiently distinct.

"Bid his Holy-oiliness keep himself out of this," it said, "or he might happen to get a sort of anointing that wouldn't agree with him."

It was the patient who had spoken.

For a few moments, thereupon, an amazed hush prevailed, and then Lizzie White, ejaculating, "Between us and harm," turned and bolted downstairs again, colliding recklessly with Mrs. Cronin, who stood aghast behind her.

She was just in time to intercept Father Kelly with his foot on the first step.

"Don't go up there for your life, your Riverince," she said; "it's no place for you. Sure it's a Protestant the man is all the while. 'Deed now, accordin' to the quare talk he has out of him, I wouldn't say he was any better than a black Presbyterian!"

Father Kelly said:

"Tchuck, tchuck! what did you bring me here for at all? I got no word of any person being sick. It's Mr. Arfeld himself I'm looking for."

And he walked off, leaving the group to buzz over a fresh aspect of the affair.

In the room above Elizabeth Cramer, on hearing Nicholas speak, had exclaimed:

"Thanks be to God!" and had then added apologetically to Catholic Kate O'Leary: "One does be glad of e'er a word out of him, if it's talking oddly he is itself."

"Sure, why wouldn't one, ma'am?" said Mrs. O'Leary; and they set about getting him to take a drop of warm beef-tea.

Whether it was by virtue of this, or of the wrathful impulse which had stirred him to speech, or of both combined, that moment marked an arrest in the decline of Nicholas Garvin's strength, and his prospect of living till the next morning seemed materially to improve.

That night was spent by Anastasia MacElvery in travelling from Dublin to Glenoona, and wondering what had happened there, as her cousin's telegram had said nothing more explicit than that they wanted her badly.

The last two or three months had been a trying time for Anastasia, chiefly because she had become subject to attacks of a tormenting jealousy. She found herself, in fact, compelled to witness the luring away from her of both her especial fetishes.

Ever since their visit to the Verolds she had felt the conviction growing, much against her will, that her mistress and Mr. Allen Verold were, in her own words, "on the highroad to making a match of it." Her dislike of the prospect was certainly inconsistent with the dissatisfaction she had so often expressed at what she considered Mrs. Hume's unworthy surroundings, and she tried to justify it by founding it on the belief that in such a remarriage her poor young lady would be "just taking up with one every bit as feckless and wool-gathering as herself, and none too well off either."

There was not, however, truth enough in these assertions to make them fairly consoling ; for not only were the Verolds' circumstances affluent exceedingly, compared with those of a Half-Square pensioner, but Mr. Allen had of late apparently roused himself up to take an interest in practical affairs not less shrewdly and capably than his neighbours.

The truth was that Anastasia, though she would fain have seen Mrs. Hume reigning over some highly desirable establishment, could not without reluctance relinquish her own incompatible protectorate.

Even more unkind was the loss she sustained by the defection of Miss Eileen, to whom, at this turn of affairs, she might have counted on becoming a person of increased importance. But Georgie Verold's insatiable fondness for children led her, in all innocence of any save the most good-natured intentions, to make her company charming to the little girl, whose affections were thereby quite captivated, a process which Anastasia watched with very natural chagrin.

Then it so happened that a former housemaid of old Mr. Willester's visited him at his dreary Dublin lodgings, where she found him left alone in a forlorn and feeble state, which impelled her to write her ex-fellow servant, Anastasia MacElvery, an indignant letter, filled with commiseration for him and abuse of his neglectful wife.

"Fretting his heart out he is yet after little Miss

Eileen," she wrote, "and nobody to do a hand's turn for him, poor man. An ugly-tempered, good-for-nothing weasel of an old woman, whatever bewitched him to look the way she was."

Upon this Anastasia suddenly resolved that she would go to the rescue, and if she could obtain Mrs. Hume's consent would take Miss Eileen with her.

Obtain it she did, considerably to her surprise, not unmingled with rather bitter reflections that the result would have been quite different in those days when Miss Eileen was her mother's sole object in life.

Nevertheless that state of things still so far persisted that she was strongly influenced by Anastasia's representations of how good an opportunity it would offer for getting Miss Eileen fitted on the spot with fine clothes, which could be provided out of the amazing sum accrued from the sale of the pearl necklet. It is likely enough that Anastasia was partly actuated by some more or less subconscious idea of seizing the occasion for an attempt to recapture the child's diverted allegiance.

But if so retribution followed swiftly on her self-seeking. For Miss Verold, hearing of the expedition, determined to accompany it, and transact some business of her own, an arrangement which quite spoiled the journey for Anastasia, who endured the mortification of sitting apart, an onlooker, while Miss Eileen bestowed all her caresses and discourse upon her newer friend.

But when Dublin was reached all such minor

grudges and grievances sank, for the time being, into oblivion. They were superseded by concern at poor old Mr. Willester's miserable plight, and eagerness to take the measures urgently required for its amelioration.

A great many things needed promptest doing to secure him a little ease in the days which would evidently be his last. A drunken attendant had to be dismissed, a trustworthy successor found ; some degree of order and comfort brought into the dismal rooms.

In these undertakings Georgie Verold assisted with zeal and judgment, and they were so successfully accomplished that the old man was very soon enjoying more peace than he had done since the evil day on which he had been married by the flighty, scheming, rapacious widow of the elder Henry Arfeld. He even regained the long-lost happiness of little Eileen's presence, for she now opportunely manifested a placid goodness, and was content to sit playing quietly near him, while he watched her with a restful sense of well-being.

It was not until this state of things had been established, and could continue well enough without her, that Anastasia received her summons to Glen-oona. The form in which it came bespoke her compliance, as to be wanted was always her wish, and the vagueness of the wording ensured the incentive of anxious curiosity.

She hoped to satisfy this at the last stage of her journey, where the long-car stopped, and she was

met by a trap from the Hall, with old Andrew Wogan as driver. But old Andrew, being dull of hearing and wits, was apt to get hold of the wrong end of the story, and he proved a very imperfect speaker, relating a confused narrative about old Joanna Garsted and a little girl getting drowned in the Oona River, only for Mr. Considine's man Garvin pulling them out; and his up and giving all sorts of impidence to Father Kelly, that wanted to give them absolution; and boys going to do destruction on Mr. Henry's big glass, that some people said he had the moon hidden away under, for fear there'd be e'er a good change in the weather—from all of which she gained only a distorted and defective outline of what had really taken place.

She was not prepared to see Nicholas Garvin looking out on the world with eyes sunken and at times vacant, for his rally had been followed by relapses, and his route back to recovery still lay through doubtful and difficult regions.

Yet his better intervals were growing steadily longer and more frequent. During one of them, after he had watched, for a while, Elizabeth Cramer and Anastasia, as they conversed in whispers, under the impression that he was asleep, he startled them by enquiring:

"Where have you Miss Eileen?" and on being told: "Up in Dublin," remarked, with some complacency: "Then it's after leaving her you are to come to Glenoona? I'd scarce have thought, Signorina, you had that much sinse and raison."



"Oh, Miss Eileen's took up with somebody else these times," Anastasia said, with a great show of indifference.

"And isn't it a very good example she's setting you?" said Nicholas.

"That depends, I should say," Anastasia replied, "on the person you take up with."

"Ah, sure, Mr. Garvin wouldn't be thinking of anybody worser than himself," put in Elizabeth, who was an interested listener.

"And no need had he," rejoined Anastasia, a retort which brought the dialogue to an inconclusive close.

The news, by this time, of course, common property in the neighbourhood, that the truth about Minnie Ree, so called, had been discovered, did not cause Anastasia much surprise. All she wondered at, she said, was that the whole thing hadn't come out long ago, like flour spilling over your black skirt out of a bag full of holes.

As the originator of the plot was still to the fore, and could give the fullest details, it did not become necessary to seek information from the scantier knowledge of a mere accomplice after the fact. Not that Anastasia was in the least reluctant to tell whatever she knew, or entertained any apprehensions about possible legal consequences of her complicity. Mr. Considine quite failed to perturb her by expressing a doubt whether she had not been guilty of compounding a felony.

Even less conscience-stricken was the far more

culpable Nicholas, who, as he struggled on towards convalescence, lay rejoicing in his bed over what he deemed the successful issue of his stratagems, and the relief of his mind from manifold fears on behalf of Miss Minette, now restored to her rightful position in society. And he replaced his delusion about the conventual peril by another equally erroneous, but more agreeable, to the effect that Mr. Considine was marrying solely with a view to providing an establishment more suitable for Miss Dormer, whom he would now have the privilege of receiving under his roof.

When Nicholas considered how well these things had turned out, his contentment waxed so great that though he could not utter his feelings in song, he was often moved to philosophic reflections on the strangeness of the world.

Undoubtedly fortune favoured him at this point in his wanderings, for it was to an extremely imprudent act that he owed the satisfactory settlement of a matter which he had lately had much at heart.

On the first day that he was allowed, still shaky and spectre-like, out of doors, he chose, as an appropriate occupation, on eluding notice for a short time, to employ himself in filling a large tank with buckets of water drawn from the pump. While he was breathlessly resting, amid these exertions, Dr. Doran happened to arrive, and expressed himself in strong terms about the inexpediency of such pursuits.

"The fact is," he said afterwards, to Elizabeth Cramer, "that if he has somebody to look after him properly he may, with care, become fairly strong again; but if he's left to his own crazy antics, now that he's getting about, it's my belief that he won't be alive in a month."

He gave the same opinion to Anastasia, who at that moment came into the yard, and the two cousins talked it over at some length before they joined Nicholas, where he sat on the edge of the tank.

"Fine discourse you've been having over there," he said. "I thought the two heads would waggle off you before you got done."

"The doctor was telling us you want somebody to be looking after you," said Mrs. Cramer.

"Then it's a lie he was telling you, saving your presence, ma'am," said Nicholas, "for ne'er a somebody I'm wanting at all but herself there."

"That's as good as saying I'm nobody," said Anastasia.

"Nobody or no, if yourself you are, you'll do for me," said Nicholas.

"I suppose I am that," said Anastasia.

"It's as sensible a thing as ever you supposed, Signorina asthore," said Nicholas; "not but what you was a middlin' contrary woman to not suppose it a while ago, the way that you might have had the minding of Miss Minette."

"'Twill be much if I haven't plenty on hands,

anyhow," said Anastasia. "Look at him, Lizzie, for mercy's sake, sitting there in the draught, with nothing on his head, and a couple of inches of his collar open. Sure now, the doctor said right enough."

## CHAPTER XVI

### AT A SAMPLE TEA-PARTY

FOR some days after the news of Mr. Pole's flight had appalled her, Mrs. Willester's mood might, without exaggeration, have been described as one of wrathful despair. With him had vanished all her golden hopes, and terribly nearly all her actual possessions; for had she not given him every farthing she could lay hands on to invest? She was too ignorant to know whether she would be involved in yet more extensive financial ruin, but she sorely feared the worst. This dread of unknown liabilities paralysed her energy, and kept her from attempting, as she otherwise would have done, to raise a sum of money by hook or by crook, in hopes that by some desperate speculation she might even now retrieve her fortunes. As it was her first wild impulse to set off immediately for Dublin having died away without result, she hung on aimlessly at the Hall, where she puzzled her relatives by an undissembled dejection, for which they knew no reason.

Before long, however, an event came to end this period of inaction and suspense. Anastasia

MacElvery had carefully kept to herself the knowledge of Mr. Willester's precarious condition, because she was aware that, should it reach his wife, her regard for appearances, if nothing else, would send her back forthwith to Dublin. "And that would be twenty pities on the poor gentleman," was Anastasia's forecast of the result.

So when Mrs. Willester, as an after-thought, chiefly for the sake of those appearances, enquired about his state, Anastasia replied :

"Well indeed, ma'am, he might be better, and he might be worse," suppressing discreetly her own views as to the probable effect on the latter contingency of Mrs. Willester's presence near the patient. His few last days, therefore, remained undisturbed by any troublous incursions, until the time when a message, flashed to Glenoona, brought the tidings that he had passed away.

Back again, perforce, in Dublin, his widow soon learned with ruthless certainty that her worst forebodings were almost fulfilled by the evil case of her pecuniary affairs. It appeared, in short, that her annual income would thenceforward amount to the sum of eighteen and fourpence.

Moreover, circumstances made it impossible for her to conceal from her family how this financial disaster had come about, and she found the disclosure hardly less galling than the fact itself.

To increase her mortification the only assistance they could offer her in these straits took the form of hospitality at the Hall, which was an abode



by no means congenial to her restless, intriguing spirit, especially now that her reign there had ended. She derived but little solace even from the aristocratic society of Lady Dorothy, whom she suspected of undervaluing the talents of Henry, her favourite son. A very hopeless sort of blind alley seemed to lie ahead. Undoubtedly fortune had done her a whole series of shrewd turns.

Among the consequences of old Mr. Willester's death was the postponement of his daughter-in-law's marriage to Allen Verold, which had been fixed for July. But as it was to be a very quiet wedding from Gentian Chalet the persons most concerned thought that it might, without impropriety, take place a few weeks later than the date originally intended.

Writing to his co-trustee, Christy Considine, about this time, Allen represented himself as very anxious to repair as speedily as possible the wrong which had been, through his negligence, inflicted on The Independency; and as reluctant to defer longer than was absolutely necessary the removal of the ineligible inmate, who had thus unjustly become a sharer in the benefits of the institution. If he had expressed his designs and sentiments with more candour, there might have emerged, from lurking at the back of his mind, the less austere virtuous consideration that the deep mourning of the bride's step-mother-in-law would preclude her appearance at the expedited wedding.

So Christy, at least, surmised, and congratulated

his friend upon such a prompt and provident action. Christy himself, just then setting off to Dresden for his own wedding, was disposed to predict that things in general would turn out well.

But they both were at fault in their conjecture about the course likely to be adopted by the elder Mrs. Willester, whose proceedings did often, indeed, put other people out in their calculations.

Shortly before the appointed day, she announced that she considered it her duty, at whatever sacrifice of her own inclinations, to support the widow of her dear husband's son with her countenance and company when taking so momentous a step; and accordingly, much to the inconvenience of its occupants, who would vastly have preferred her room, at Gentian Chalet she arrived, entering it in a swirl of rusty crêpe drapery, like a bustling black cloud.

To set things on a pleasant footing she at once informed Mrs. Hume that the pearl necklet had been always intended for a wedding-gift in case of her marrying again, and added a hope that it had fetched a good price.

Mrs. Hume wisely left the answering of this question to Anastasia Garvin, who replied with thrifty truth that there was enough, anyway, for the grey voile travelling-costume, and Miss Eileen's bit of a muslin frock.

Nicholas Garvin had, on his marriage, resumed his former situation with Mr. Considine at Clonmalin House, a post which he considered desirable,

because it enabled him to "keep an eye on the treatment Miss Minette and Master Michael would be getting there." That eye was, as may be supposed, a critical, not to say censorious, one.

Now when the ceremony was over, and the happy pair had set out for Sweden, and Georgie Verold had carried off little Eileen to spoil egregiously, Mrs. Willester had a surprise in store for everybody, who had taken it for granted that she, too, would leave Gentian Chalet without delay, for she not only remained there, but took steps which showed that she contemplated a prolonged stay, getting her small properties sent to her from Glenoona, and settling down with all the airs of a permanent occupier.

In doing so she met with very slight opposition. Georgie Verold, in the absence of Christy and her brother, made but feeble attempts to exercise authority. Having called twice or thrice on the intruder, and hinted quite ineffectually that there should be limits to the duration of her sojourn in The Half-Square, Miss Verold decided to let the task of giving formal notice to quit devolve upon her colleagues when they came home.

By that time, however, the difficulty of carrying out the eviction seemed to have seriously increased. Mrs. Willester had entirely persuaded several people, and nearly persuaded even herself, that her installation in Gentian Chalet, if it were vacated by Mrs. Hume, had been an understood thing all along between herself and Mr. Verold.

“ A mere verbal agreement, of course, it is true,” she said loftily ; “ but *what* difference *can* that make among gentlefolk ? ”

Mr. Verold, for his part, was so fully conscious of how far from collected he had been during his interview with the alarming widow, that he felt unable to give the statement the emphatic contradiction which its utter mendacity deserved.

And the upshot of it was that she remained mistress of the situation, continuing her residence, though under a protest never definitely withdrawn. After all, as Christy Considine said, she certainly was qualified in point of age and destitution, and it might be that her ingenious effrontery merited some reward.

She herself, on the other hand, privately regarded her settlement there as a sort of penance. The numerous troubles which had afflicted her of late had brought on a fit of self-reproach and self-distrust, more particularly wakening apprehensions that the plan by which she had rid herself of her step-daughter-in-law was not viewed with favour by the higher powers. This being so, she adopted the belief that they would accept her stepping into Mrs. Hume's shoes as an act of expiation. Seeing that her only other alternatives were residence in a distasteful household, or living on her own resources, which amounted to a fraction over a half-penny a day, the expiation was a convenient one. But she was honestly blind to this aspect of the matter.

It would not have been in the nature of things if events such as these had failed to rouse much interest among lookers-on and gossips.

Rathkennen was perhaps most excited by the news of Christy Considine's engagement. He had been so frequently married by the speculations and rumours of his acquaintances in the course of his protracted bachelorhood, and so many different endings, all more or less sensational, had been predicted for it by disapproving friends, that everybody was disposed to see something extraordinary in what had really occurred. Failing either a housemaid or a multi-millionairess, they made the most of the fact that the future Mrs. Christy was a girl without a penny, who had "to addle her bread," like the sweetheart of the Yorkshire farmer's son. Their strongest flight of imagination described her as a Lancashire factory hand.

To Sir Ockley Latham fell the pleasure of launching the news into a fairly large family party. The gathering in the drawing-room at Latham Hall comprised, besides his wife, daughter, and resident sister Florence, his married sisters, the Vicaress and Edith FitzHenry, with her son and niece, when he entered briskly, and observed, in a carefully casual tone :

"I suppose you've heard the latest intelligence ? Christy Considine has been captured at last. He's engaged to a Miss Hill or Hall or Wall, who's a lady help or nursery governess to some people living abroad."

Everybody gave utterance for a while to exclamatory astonishment in a confused chorus, which gradually subsided, leaving a general sense that it was a great pity, but just what might have been expected.

"And then there's that foolish Allen Verold," ran the first solo that emerged—it was by Lady Latham. "I daresay this Miss Wall or Ball is just as good as his mysterious widow from The Half-Square. It will be really rather awkward, and make one quite uncertain what to do about visiting."

"Why, it would be easy enough, I should think, not to call," said Florence Latham.

She was always ready to suggest a solution of the kind; as with advancing years she grew more soured and unsociable, and wearier of her too familiar surroundings.

"Of course, there having been nobody to call on at Clonmalin House for such a length of time does simplify matters," Lady Latham said reflectively. "There would be no breaking off—only not beginning."

"I doubt that that would do at all," Mrs. Siberry said, very decidedly.

In those days she was unwontedly tolerant in her attitude towards her neighbours, owing to the fact that her eldest daughter, Philippa, had already set up a love affair, and that her engagement to Dermott Lynch, the District Inspector, would presently be made public.



It was, indeed, a poor little match enough, not more than merely passable ; still, it brought back to Alice Siberry memories of her own youth, softening and mellowing her sentiments. Also it urged her to consider other growing-up daughters, who should be provided with opportunities for doing likewise, or even better, and the closing against them of two from among the few neighbours' houses seemed highly inexpedient. So she now continued :

"It wouldn't do at all. Remember how disagreeable we should find it to be constantly meeting them at other places. All sorts of people do all sorts of things nowadays. She may be one of the Tarbarteglish Halls. And if you were to make a trade of avoiding everybody you don't exactly like, you might as well shut yourself up in a box at once."

Her sister Florence replied :

"Oh, *you* very likely couldn't get out of it that way, but it's quite a different thing for people who aren't obliged to act as professional district visitors."

However, although she now had the last word, it was Mrs. Siberry's counsels that eventually prevailed ; and both the unsatisfactory brides were called upon in due course.

It was, in fact, when discharging this social duty towards Mrs. Allen Verold that the Vicaress became acquainted with Mrs. Willester, who, needless to say, bestowed on the Verolds fully as much of her company as the slender marriage connection could

be imagined to warrant. A liking sprang up between the two, engendered by a certain similarity in conversational tastes and talents, and their acquaintance developed into intimacy such that Mrs. Siberry broke through a long-standing custom, which had caused her to shun with ostentatious contempt the precincts of The Independency, and she might not seldom be seen as a visitor at Gentian Chalet.

Thus it came about that one autumn afternoon, several years later than these weddings, Mrs. Siberry had accepted Mrs. Willester's invitation to tea. She was not the only guest, three residents in The Half-Square helping her to fill the Chalet's very small sitting-room.

There had come from Clematis Corner Mrs. Fanning, large and mournful, and, as her hostess subsequently remarked, not much livelier to talk to than a bolster.

And from Blue Bells, little elderly Miss Hackett, whose most noticeable characteristic was her curious gait, abounding in curvets and flourishes, a habit acquired in early youth, when it had been her lot always to take her walks abroad slowly along with very old people, and had had no other means of working off her superfluous activity.

And from the Look-Out, Miss Vere-Meade, a new-comer, who at fifty odd was beginning to live a life of her own, with amazing zest, and an unlimited appetite for exploration, so much so that she found it expedient to utilise her garden-plot as a sort of tethering clog, imposing upon herself an

hour's work therein at morning and evening, to keep her roving within bounds.

For this party Mrs. Willester had provided an entertainment of a singularly varied description in respect to eatables and drinkables. A miscellany of small dishes and plates and teapots and jugs had spread all over the room.

The bill of fare might have been summed up as a little of everything. There were minute slices of sundry kinds of cake; tiny sandwiches composed of bread unlike in colour and texture, with internal shreds and patches of fish, cheese, jelly, and jam; biscuits of endlessly assorted patterns; sundry farinaceous preparations; different sorts of chocolate and cocoa in homœopathic quantities; curiously blended decoctions of coffee and tea.

Poor Mrs. Fanning indeed had an unhappy experience with her cup, which the exercise of her utmost politeness could not enable her to swallow. On investigation it was discovered that to an over-strong infusion of Bradford's Desiccated Meat-Juice, sugar and Merbury's Aromatic Nut-cream had inadvertently been added, with extremely unpalatable results.

Miss Hackett had a similar, though less trying, misadventure with sweetened Celery Coffee; but these were the only at all serious accidents, and Mrs. Willester was so well satisfied with the success of her feast that she could not refrain from giving an account of its origin to Mrs. Siberry, who had lingered for a final gossip behind the other guests.

"Do try a little of this Savoury Essence, dear Mrs. Siberry, before you set off," she said. "They say it's very supporting, and your trap won't be here, I hope, yet a while. Well now, I'm glad to think it went off nicely. But *how* stupid of poor Mrs. Fanning to pick out just the one thing that wasn't quite what it should have been! You see this is what I call a Sample Tea-party. Haven't you noticed how many offers of free samples there are advertised nowadays? It's really wonderful what you can get by just sending a halfpenny card. Some of them do require threepence to cover postage, etc., which, of course, would come too expensive; but to tell you the truth, I've sometimes written without enclosing the stamps—and the sample has come all the same. So it occurred to me to collect them, and make use of them in this way from time to time. I find that in two or three months I generally have sufficient for the purpose, and if the cakes and biscuits have got a thought stale, I just pop them into the oven for a few minutes, and they're as fresh as ever again. So there I am, provided with a menoo which would otherwise be altogether beyond my means. You might find it worth your while to try the plan yourself one of these days, dear Mrs. Siberry. It's really uncommonly good value for your money."

"I'm sure it is," Mrs. Siberry said; "but I'm afraid I should never have time, with so much on my hands. I'll tell my daughter, Philippa Lynch; she might like to know about it."

"I get a lot of advertisements up at Miss Verold's," said Mrs. Willester. "She takes in heaps of papers and mags., because Eileen likes the pictures. But if her brother Allen gets the Vice-consulship at Limaretta, where the climate's superb, she talks of going out to them with the child, which would be a loss to me."

Allen Verold had some time before accepted a small appointment in Eastern Europe, as much, if the truth were known, to escape from his wife's ex-step-mother-in-law's visits as for any other reason.

"I suppose Eileen will be more outrageously spoiled than ever, when she's back again with her mother," Mrs. Willester continued. "Not but that her Aunt Georgie does about the most anybody well could in that direction."

"And I should think much the same might be said of those two Dormer children with the Considines," said Mrs. Siberry. "Such work as there is over them—tutors for the boy, as if schools weren't good enough, and the girl taken up to Dublin for violin lessons, and dancing classes, and all that sort of thing! To think of her opportunities, and my poor daughters hatching at home from one year's end to the other."

"Minette Dormer's growing up pretty enough," said Mrs. Willester, "but she'll never be tall like your girls. I saw her the other day at the gate-lodge, when I went to ask after Nicholas Garvin, who has been ill again, and looks very shaky. He

never really recovered from the effects of that odd affair in the river at Glenoona, when he and Minette were near being drowned. She was there colloquing with Anastasia. In a year or two I suppose they'll be giving her a season in London. Of course the young Dormers are immensely richer than the Considines, who probably find it pays to bring them up as expensively as possible. You may be sure they'll make a good thing out of Miss Minette's presentation at Court."

"I sincerely hope," asserted Mrs. Siberry, "that they'll get her safely married before some very queer story comes out about her, as there's certain to do sooner or later."

"When the Considines take to going away regularly, as well as Sir Ockley, and the FitzHenrys," said Mrs. Willester, "there'll be quite a Hijarrah from poor Rathkennen: the neighbourhood will seem positively deserted."

"Oh, people apparently think they can't exist without going hither and thither in these days," said Mrs. Siberry.

"I've some notion myself of spending Christmas at my son Henry's place in Glenoona," Mrs. Willester said apologetically. "It's two years since I saw him. He was just about selling his telescope then, and getting a microscope instead, as he has given up astronomy and taken to entomology. A great pity, in my humble judgment, for he was really making his mark, and such a come-down, from the stars to creepy-crawly insects. I told



him he ought to write a poem about it—his verses have been most highly spoken of—and call it ‘From the Great Bear to the Little Beetles,’ or something of that sort. Between you and me, I rather think my daughter-in-law, Lady Dorothy, used to throw cold water on his star-gazing, as she called it; nothing came of it, she said. She’s a fearfully practical-minded woman. Of course it’s easy to go into the opposite extreme: there’s her sister, Lady Olive Nugent, for instance.”

“I’m afraid I must be going,” Mrs. Siberry said, rising abruptly. She had learned from experience that when Mrs. Willester got among her titled connections her talk tended to become interminable. “We have a Chinese missionary meeting at the school-house to-night.”

“One of the chief privations imposed by my narrow means,” Mrs. Willester said, with sudden solemnity, “is the inability to aid such a cause. Not but that there are plenty of pagans in this country: for instance, as I was saying, there’s my daughter-in-law’s sister, Lady Olive Nugent. She’s staying now at the Considines’ other place, Drumkyle Park, that used to be her son’s—I see your trap only just turned the corner of the road; it won’t be here for two or three minutes—and the reason she has gone there is that the caretaker, Elizabeth Cramer, whom I always thought a sensible sort of person, declares she has often seen poor Claude Nugent, who was killed there by an accident ever so long ago, walking about since

then in the grounds. One can hardly imagine it, but Lady Olive actually believes this story, and is stopping at the Park in hopes of getting a glimpse of him too. Would you ever have supposed that any sane woman—of education—would be so deluded ? ”

“ She must have very little to occupy her mind with,” said the Vicarress. “ But indeed we haven’t much reason for blaming the heathen, if you consider all the rubbish about ghosts and spirits that you see in even respectable papers. It’s quite disgusting to think of people wasting their time over such stuff. Good-bye, and thank you so much.”

“ Ah, here’s your trap,” said Mrs. Willester. “ How delightful it was to see you ! . . . I’m sure it’s true,” she reflected, watching the Vicarage pony trot away, “ that, as some one says, everybody is more or less cracked. But I’ve no patience with that sort of trash—it’s beyond the beyonds. I do hope that Henry will never take to it, for it would be far worse even than the beetles and earwigs. They, at any rate, really exist.”

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